MANHUNT

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35 CENTS

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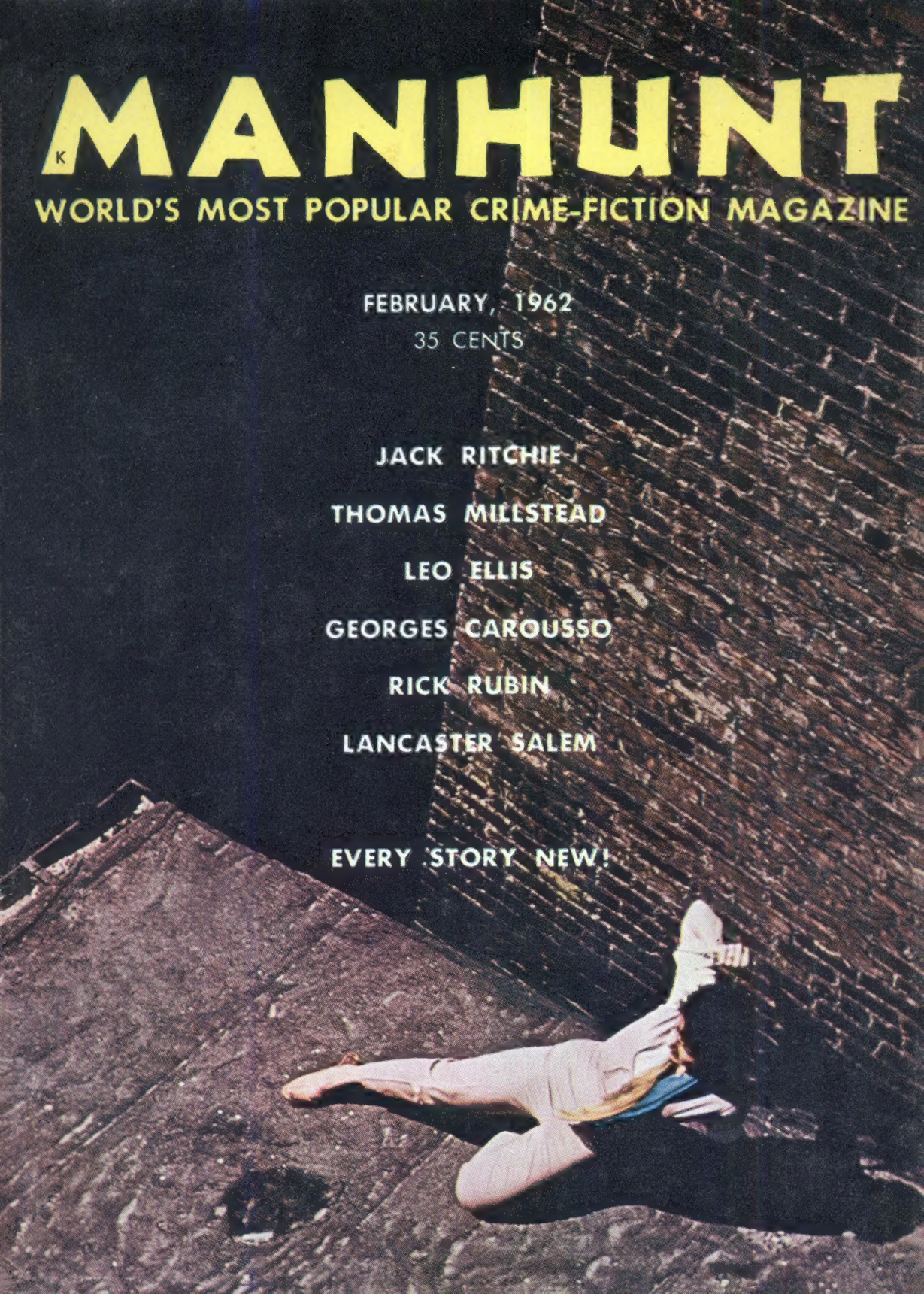

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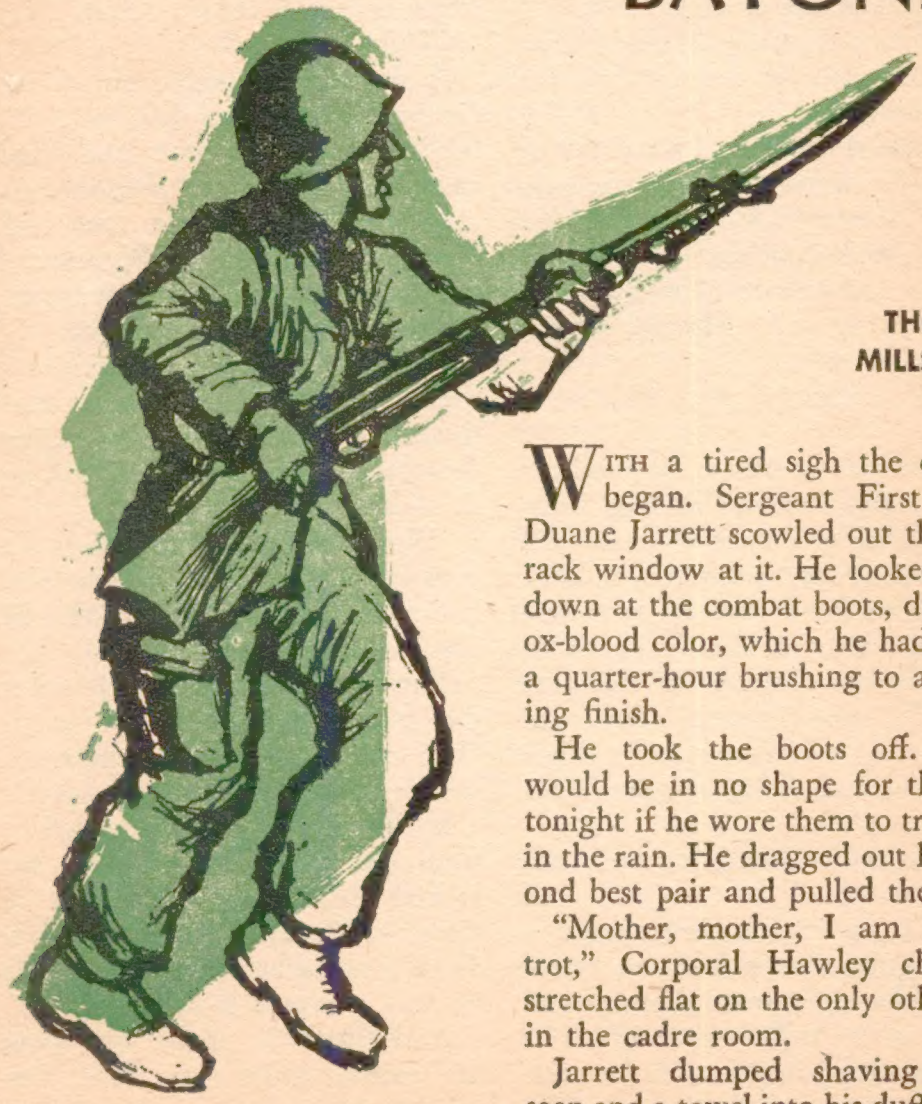
"This is a bayonet! It is used for to kill men! It has no other use. . ."

THE BLOODLESS BAYONET



BY
THOMAS
MILLSTEAD

With a tired sigh the drizzle began. Sergeant First Class Duane Jarrett scowled out the barrack window at it. He looked back down at the combat boots, dyed an ox-blood color, which he had spent a quarter-hour brushing to a glinting finish.

He took the boots off. They would be in no shape for the city tonight if he wore them to training in the rain. He dragged out his second best pair and pulled them on.

"Mother, mother, I am hot to trot," Corporal Hawley chanted, stretched flat on the only other cot in the cadre room.

Jarrett dumped shaving gear, soap and a towel into his duffel bag.

"Cuttin' out for D.C.? I still got me a twenty. Maybe I'll come with."

Jarrett ignored him. Hawley was new to the company, pink-cheeked, a pipe smoker. He was not somebody Jarrett needed along.

"What's the time?" Jarrett asked.

"Ten to."

They'd be there on the hour, the trainees. Drizzle or no drizzle, Saturday or no Saturday. Well, once he got this one over he was free for the weekend.

He slid the bayonet in and out of its scabbard, relishing the smooth, deadly hiss of it. Then he buckled on his web belt and put on his poncho and yellow helmet liner.

"Give 'em hell," Hawley jeered, puffing his pipe.

Jarrett slammed out without a word.

From the company street he cut down a path across the soggy Virginia hillside, a narrow path he'd worn down for twenty-two months now. The same path to the same training area to shout the same words to the— But no, not the same men. The men changed. They came as recruits, they left as soldiers. They went overseas. They fought. They killed . . .

Jarrett had a shambling awkward walk—untypical of a short and stocky man—which three years in the Regular Army had not remedied. His eyes were brown and empty as a stuffed squirrel's. His smooth, square, milk white face was equally devoid of expression. The heavily corded tendons running out of his wrists curled and uncurled his hands in spasms as he walked.

Twenty-two months. The long blur of faces in front of him. The shifting blur of new faces. The old faces gone. Gone to FECOM, the Far East Command. Gone to Korea. Gone to the testing. To the fierce ordeal. Gone to combat.

While he . . .

A drooping branch from a sodden willow slashed his face. He broke it off and with one hand snapped it in two and then in four.

"Korea?" the major had said. "Out of the question, Sergeant. I can't give up my best cadreman." Then the major had laughed.

But the laugh was wrong. As if there were another reason. And then the major had been too hearty, dropping a fatherly arm around his shoulders.

"Don't believe everything the boys tell you about the *mama sans* in Seoul, Sergeant. They can't hold it to our home-grown stuff."

Then the times after that when the major had been less jovial. "I've told you, Sergeant, repeatedly. You're too valuable to me here."

But the major had not looked up from the papers on his desk, not looked him in the eye. As if he wasn't telling it all. As if there was an ugly secret between them which he was ashamed to speak of.

And then the major was gone and another major at his desk. "Permission refused, Sergeant. Adams

told me you were his best instructor. I'll need good instructors. I'm going to make this the sharpest unit on post. I can't spare you."

Then he had looked at Jarrett, intently, oddly, tapping his jaw with a pencil. It was almost a conniving look. A look that might have said: You can volunteer all you want, but I know what sort of man you are. Jarrett memorized that look.

"We need our best men here," the major finally went on. "Anybody can lug a rifle around and dig foxholes. Now I don't want to hear anymore about it."

As he left the room, Jarrett had felt that look still on him.

Well, the major hadn't heard anymore about it. What was the use? You showed other men how. That was all.

And it was too late now to try again. The cease-fire was two months old. There would be no more fighting. No more need for a man who knew the art of it. Never again. They'd shut the door on all that.

The trainees were there, a vast green-smudged semi-circle of them, sprawled out, exhausted, wretched. Their noncoms leaned against the spare wooden platform, smoking. They nodded to Jarrett, then turned away. He didn't know their names. The noncoms changed so swiftly, too.

It was raining harder. Channels of mud, like sluggish snakes, rubbed against his boots.

"Got a rifle?" he asked. His voice was an indistinct whine. None of the noncoms heard him. He repeated the question. Someone handed him an M-1.

Jarrett clambered onto the platform cautiously. It was easy to slip on when it was wet.

The troops squatting in the rain looked up at him dumbly. This was the second week of their training cycle. They clutched their rifles self-consciously.

The sea of faces sickened him. To what use, trying to tell them anything? They had no need for it now. They would never know the shouts and screams of hand-to-hand battle. The slash and parry, the clean slice of steel into flesh. . . .

As he never would.

As they knew he never would.

Their eyes were on him, hundreds of eyes, dark and hidden under the lids of their helmets. But he could feel them, resentful, mocking. Show us! Teach us to kill! You up there, who never saw a Chinese soldier, who never heard an enemy bullet! Teach us!

Jarrett threw off his poncho and drew his bayonet. His hand tightened around it. He felt the taunting, the vicious stares waver and fall back.

Smoothly, he clicked the bayonet onto the barrel of the rifle.

"All right, you men, on your feet!"

They froze, pierced by that sudden shriek, then scrambled up.

"Fix bayonets!"

There was a ripple of awkward, clanging movement in the faded forest of men.

"Faster! You gotta be faster! You think Joe Chink, anybody else gonna wait? Fast! You gotta get him before he get you!"

Excitement pushed his voice even higher.

"This is a bayonet! It is used for to kill men! It has no other use! . . ."

"All right! On guard! Long thrust! Move! Recover! Withdraw!"

"At the throat! Keep it pointed at the throat! Rattle him! Scare him! Make him want to puke! Make him drop his guard! Short thrust! Move!"

"Fast! Get your arm out! Get him where he's open! Chest! Belly! Crotch!"

"Withdraw! Yank it out hard! His muscles tighten up, you won't get that blade back out again! You get it stuck in his ribs, somebody gonna get you before you work it loose! High port, crossover! Ready, whirl! Long thrust! Move!"

"Yell! Louder! Let's hear you! Yell! Scare the guts out of him! Vertical butt stroke! Smash, slash, stab! Parry left! Long thrust! Move! Holler!"

Bellowing, gasping like maddened, lance-pricked bulls, the troops spun and stabbed below him. Urgency rode his strident, goading voice. He crouched, legs tensed to spring. A hot sweat ran with the raindrops coursing down his cheeks. His mind emptied of everything but the blade on the rifle so light, so free in his hands.

"Faster! Whirl! Long thrust! Faster! Get your weight into it! Withdraw! Whirl! Holler! Short thrust! Hard! Into his guts! All the way in! Yell! Withdraw! High port, crossover! Butt stroke! Smash, slash, thrust! Faster! Yell! Louder! Long thrust! Move—"

Afterward, he struggled back into his poncho, a stooped, tired looking little man. With caution, he climbed down from the platform. He wiped the wet from the bayonet, put it back in its scabbard, returned the rifle and sloshed back to his barrack.

Corporal Hawley was asleep. His pipe lay on the floor, its dottle scattered. Stealthily, Jarrett changed into his class-A uniform. He finished packing his duffel bag, then looked out the window. The rain had stopped. He took off his muddy boots, put on the clean pair and carefully bloused his trousers, paratrooper style.

Hawley awoke as Jarrett opened the door.

"Goin' now? Wait up. I just have to shave."

"Naw," said Jarrett, and went out. Hawley had been to Korea. He was a talker. He was full of smart words.

Jarrett caught a bus out of camp almost immediately, but he had an hour's layover in Richmond. He

drank coffee in the lunch room and glanced down periodically at his boots. They'd been splotched by several puddles as he left the base. He'd have to polish them again in Washington. He'd brought his shoeshine kit along.

"Sergeant Jarrett?"

A tall form loomed over him, beaming down.

"You are Sergeant Jarrett? I don't think I could forget you."

The soldier put his hand out. He was a skinny corporal wearing rimless GI glasses. Jarrett warily took the hand.

"Ed Brewster's the name. You wouldn't remember me. I took trainin' here a year ago. I'll never forget those classes of yours. Long thrust! Short thrust! Whirl!"

Brewster grinned broadly. Jarrett's empty face grew taut. He noted the yellow shield and black horse's head on Brewster's shoulder. The First Calvary. The man had seen action in Korea. Jarrett was conscious of his own stateside Second Army patch.

"How are things at the old fort?" Brewster asked.

"Okay."

"You goin' far?"

"D.C."

"Good. Me, too. I'm gettin' out, Sarge. You R.A.'s can run the Army from now on in."

They walked toward the buses. Brewster, dragging a heavy barracks bag, limped. He caught Jarrett's look and laughed.

"Like you told us, you don't want to mess with Joe Chink. I picked me up some shrapnel."

There was a line, mostly soldiers and sailors, outside the bus. Jarrett pushed to the head of it, hoping to lose Brewster. He took a seat far in the rear and slumped down.

"Hey, there you are." Brewster eased himself into the outside seat.

"Still teachin' the same class?"

Jarrett's hands contracted. The knuckles went white. "Yeah."

"Must be nobody can match you when it comes to bayonets," said Brewster.

Jarrett looked quickly at the corporal, searching for the barely perceptible grin of malice.

"No stuff," Brewster went on, "I never forgot those lessons of yours. It might be they saved my life. I don't mean I ever had to stick a bayonet in anybody. It never came to that. It's just the way you made me feel. Like gettin' hit in the face with a bucketful of cold water. You made me know I was goin' to be in a sure enough war. Up to then, we'd all been sort of goofin' around. We weren't, after that. That helped, overseas. That's what makes real soldiers, I guess."

Real soldiers. Did he put an edge of sarcasm in that? Jarrett glared at the man out of the corner of his eyes. Was there a glint of derision behind those glasses? Real soldiers met the enemy. Real soldiers got shrapnel in their legs. Real soldiers didn't just play at it like a game.

The bus nosed out of the terminal.

"Not that I was gung-ho or anythin'," Brewster laughed. "Weren't many that were. We were too scared. You'd've been disappointed in us, probably."

Jarrett closed his eyes, feigning sleep. This was the kind they shipped to combat. The weak, the inept, the sniveling. He could imagine Brewster, wild eyed, mouth agape, a rifle trembling in his scrawny arms. He could visualize companies of Brewsters, battalions of them. Milksops. Recoiling from the flash of steel. Vomiting at the spurt of blood.

And he saw himself. The comforting bulk of the M-1 filling his hands. The familiar wicked blade probing boldly ahead of him, like the snout of an angry shark jabbing through the sea. He saw himself as being *sure*. Knowing what to do. Knowing in every muscle, knowing deep in his bones. *Now! Long thrust! Move!*

The violent rhythm of it. The smooth throw of his heft. The jagged coupling! Steel made one with flesh!

The rightness of it! The surging satisfaction of doing, correctly, instinctively, what ought to be done.

Then his grunt as he jerked and the dripping, steaming blade came free. His own body hard and glowing, barely winded. Ready. Ready for the next one. Serene and sure and ready.

With a twinge, he thought of Brewster's wound. Wasted. Wasted on a yapping clerk-typist like that.

Oh, God, if he could have had shrapnel buried in his own leg. There'd be no crafty, smirking looks when he came limping out before the recruits. There'd be respect. Maybe even admiration. But that wasn't necessary. Respect was enough. Respect for a man who knew what he was talking about—because he'd been there.

"Don't let them tell you this pig-sticker's just for show, men! I got cause to know different."

And the eyes—wide, awed, intent—taking it all in.

A car horn bleated sharply. Jarrett's eyes flew open. Brewster, beside him, was dozing. Jarrett stared out the window, chin in hand, for the remaining two hours of the trip.

Past him, like a poorly plotted sequence in a tepid travelogue, rolled the Pentagon, the Washington Monument and the white masoleums of government buildings on Constitution Avenue. In one of them, he thought with dull anger, are the records of every man who ever served. They know who saw combat and who didn't. Then the travelogue ended and they were at the depot.

"Good luck to you, Sarge," said Brewster, insisting again on shaking hands.

"See ya."

There was no indication it had rained in Washington. The side-

walks shimmered in the August sun and blinding shafts of light ricochetted off the car windows.

Jarrett made his way quickly to a hotel on Fourteenth Street. He went there often but the clerk—the same fat, rotten-toothed clerk who had always been on duty—looked blankly into space while Jarrett registered. The old man in the faded bellboy uniform carried Jarrett's bag to the fifth floor room without a word. It was not a hotel whose guests craved recognition.

The maid had not yet cleaned up after previous occupants. The blankets on the bed were in a tangle. Paper plates and napkins littered the floor. The room, packed tight with hot air, reeked of hamburgers and onions. An empty gin bottle lay in the wastebasket.

Jarrett unlocked his duffel bag, took out his shoeshine kit and polished his boots. Then he zipped and locked the bag and went out, taking the key with him.

Twenty degrees cooler inside, said the sign outside the double feature. He went in. The first picture, about teenage boys and girls and their hot rods, was as unreal to him as the talking cat and mouse in the color cartoon. The second feature was a war movie. He watched with scorn, hating the actors dressed like soldiers, pretending to fight and to kill. But there was a realistic battle scene near the end. A girl in the aisle ahead of him bent forward, repelled but enraptured. Jarrett's chest swelled. A sense of confidence, of completeness flowed through him. He could handle himself in a situation like the one on the screen. He wanted to tell the girl that. If only she could know. If only they realized, all of them. If only they had let him—

And then despair drenched him. Why hadn't they let him? What hadn't they told him?

It was dark when he left the theater, but not much cooler. His room had been tidied up, but the stench of hamburgers and onions remained. He washed and shaved and took the bayonet from his duffel bag, listening to its whisper as he slipped it in and out of its scabbard.

Then, his face softened and almost boyish, he got out the Combat Infantry Badge and the Purple Heart and the DSM ribbons and carefully pinned them to his right shirt pocket. He studied them in the mirror a long while, making certain they were evenly aligned.

He always eyed the clerk and the old bellboy warily when he went out in the evening. But they never seemed to notice his altered uniform.

There was a shy moment when first he stepped onto the sidewalk, burningly aware of the difference in his appearance. Then confidently he moved into the tide of pedestrian traffic.

It was his custom to eat at a restaurant a block from the hotel. He

had a lot of time. It wasn't eight-thirty yet. A waitress came over, let her eyes fall on his chest, and smiled. He smiled back, but only politely, and ordered steak, rare, French fries and coffee, black.

When his head bent to sip the coffee, he detected the women in the booth. They were giggling and bantering in loud voices. They must have had a couple of drinks already. He wouldn't have to look much further tonight.

The one facing him was prettier, with long chestnut hair and full lips and an insolent way of carrying her head. Too pretty. It was the other one who interested him. He only saw her face when she turned and her eyes raked him fleetingly before she looked away and the two of them laughed. Her neck was swarthy and showed heavy lines when she twisted about. Her nose was hooked, her eyes heavy with mascara. Between bursts of laughter, when she moved her head in half profile, she was biting her lower lip.

Jarrett never smiled. Instead, at her every backward glance he looked squarely into her eyes. She was biting her lips harder now.

The women got up to leave and scrupulously avoided looking at him as they passed. The darker one, the lip-biter, was heavy in the hips and ankles. Jarrett studied her while they paid the cashier.

He gave them a minute while he checked himself in the long mirror behind the counter. Face cleanly shaved, uniform crisp, shirt stretched tightly against the wide bulk of his chest, ribbons bright and neat. He went out.

They hadn't gotten far. They were pointing in a store window. They knew he'd be coming.

For several blocks he followed. He was in no hurry. The lip-biter stole an occasional crudely concealed look behind. He stared back, unsmiling.

The women turned into an arcade amusement lobby. When Jarrett entered, they were having their pictures taken at a twenty-five cent automatic camera device. They compared photos, squealing. Jarrett played a pinball machine.

The lip-biter moved on to an electric eye rifle and its mobile grizzly bear target. She fired two shots and missed. The pretty one snickered.

Jarrett walked over. "You're holdin' it wrong," he told the lip-biter. He took the rifle, raised it quickly and fired. The bear froze, hit mortally, while a bell clanged.

"Grip it tight," Jarrett said, and helped the woman nestle the weapon into her right shoulder. She scored hits with two of her remaining five shots.

"Let me try now," the pretty one clamored, grabbing for the rifle.

"How 'bout a drink?" Jarrett said.

"Now?" said the pretty one.

"Well, I am kind of thirsty," the lip-biter laughed nervously.

Jarrett pivoted toward the door. The women followed.

"The beer you get in this kind of place," complained the pretty one when they were seated at a table in a bar next door. Jarrett had known she'd be like that. He fastened his eyes on the lip-biter. She smiled and flushed. She wasn't accustomed to being selected first. Jarrett had counted on that.

"What're all those for?" she asked, touching his ribbons.

He shrugged. "Souvenirs from Korea."

"Jeez, you must've been in on a lot of it."

He smiled for the first time. "Some."

They had four more beers. The lip-biter was named Joy. Jarrett didn't bother to learn the pretty one's name. She grew increasingly pouty. Joy became giggly and boisterous. The pretty one left at last for the ladies' room.

"Can't we drop her?" Jarrett asked. He squeezed Joy's knee.

Joy tittered and ground out a smeared cigarette. She went out to speak to her friend. When the two returned, the pretty one grabbed her purse, tilted her nose up high and stamped out the door.

Joy and Jarrett had another beer.

"Let's go to my place," said Jarrett. He stood.

Joy gnawed more fiercely on her lip. "Is it far?"

"No. Let's go."

She laughed, her husky voice suddenly shrill. She got up, tripping on her chair. Jarrett grabbed her arm.

"Let's go."

He walked her briskly toward the hotel. He felt coolly competent now, sure of himself. The faces streaming by were powerless to harm him. They were empty of accusation.

Then one of them stopped, blocking his way.

"Say, that's all right. That's all right."

Jarrett recognized Gurney, a master sergeant from battalion. Gurney was drunk. A vein throbbed in his forehead. He winked at Joy.

"Old Jarrett's not such a dummy at that, eh, honey? He does all right."

Gurney smirked crookedly at Jarrett. "How 'bout an introduction, to an ol' buddy?" Then his gelitanous eyes slid down the front of Jarrett's uniform.

Gurney coughed out a rattling snort.

"What the *hell?* Combat infantry? You never been overseas, Jarrett. Korea ribbons? The DSM? You never been in combat. What the *hell?* What the *hell?*"

Jarrett felt the blood drain dizzily from his head. The retching taste of bile bubbled in his mouth.

He looked at Joy.

She knew! She knew now! . . .

He clenched his fists into a trembling ball of flesh and bone, reeling under the thundering waves bearing him down.

Joy's lips curled upward.

Sneering! Mocking! Laughing! She knew! Like the others, she knew!

Dimly, a voice insinuated itself through the hammering of his pulses.

A strong voice. A sure voice. His own voice.

At the throat! Long thrust! Move!

He took her arm and pulled her away.

Gurney's red-flecked eyes blinked after them.

"Who's your friend?" Joy said with a little laugh.

He didn't answer. Let her laugh! Let them all laugh! They'd see! Now! Finally, they'd see!

Smash, slash, thrust!

Joy spoke again. He couldn't hear her.

His own voice, shouting from the back of his head, was drowning out everything. *Long thrust! Move!*

The hotel was a structure of wax, melting into ever-changing shapes before his eyes. Spittle dripped onto his chin.

He didn't see the fat clerk, the ancient bellboy. Somehow, he and Joy were on the fifth floor. From somewhere he produced the key.

He locked the door behind them. She said something else, smiling.

Mocking! Taunting!

He groped for the duffel bag, and his frantic hands plunged into it. Then he stood, his back to her, the bayonet naked before him.

At the throat! Long thrust! Move! Smash, slash, thrust!

She was mouthing more words. Then she froze, her lips wide in a wet, ugly oval. Her throat hardened into a nest of vulnerable cords.

She was unable to move. With his left hand he had her waist. In his right, the steel did a tiny, darting dance, like the tongue of a snake.

Long thrust! Move!

He lunged.

And as he did he knew.

Knew what the major knew, what the others knew. What must have been written all over him. The secret knowledge they all had had of him.

That he would never do it. That he couldn't do it. That he was a coward.

That he could never kill. Anyone. For any reason.

Raging, he threw the woman aside. He plunged the blade into the yielding mattress of the hotel bed and pulled it out and stabbed it back in again, hacking, slashing. Sobbing.

It's the Law

Collected by Floyd Hurl

In Carrizozo, New Mexico

a local statute makes it illegal for any man or woman to walk in the streets unshaven.

In New York

a statute states that red-headed girls should be barred from professional baseball except in Kings County and the village of Black Rock, effective beginning January 1, 2009.

In Sausalito, California

it is illegal to get drunk without the permission of the Board of Supervisors.

In Colorado

there is a law which prohibits women from wearing dresses with skirts shorter than 18 inches from the floor.

In Hot Springs, Arkansas

it is an offense of the law to make a false statement or oath in order to obtain a free bath.

In Kansas

a law forbids baby buggies to be pushed on the sidewalk. They must like other wheeled vehicles be driven in the street.

In Oklahoma

it is illegal to spear fish unless the fisherman, like the fish, is completely submerged.

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FOUND AND LOST

For weeks, Herregat shuffled through the filthy streets, the rank stinking bars, the listless and obscene burlesque houses, the infested skid-row hotels, his eyes alert and searching . . . his heart black with hatred.

BY T. E. BROOKS

HERREGAT pushed the door of the Star Dust Bar and Grill, making his way into the stench of stale whiskey, the cigarette smoke—past the not very fastidious human beings. At the back of the bar near a rear exit he found a seat and ordered a drink.

A glance told him that the man he looked for was not here. He swallowed some of his drink. It was rotten whiskey. His stomach tightened when it hit. He watched the door. His man might be the next one through it. His long fingers squeezed the glass. He'd find him. Sooner or later he'd find him. Something excited flicked in his eyes for a moment.

Herregat watched a cockroach amble confidently across the back bar. His hands, resting on the bar,

felt the grimy surface under them. Dredging a cess pool was filthy work. It took a long time; and this was a big cess pool, the itinerant, vagrant, waste belly of Los Angeles.

He finished his drink and ordered another. Someone came in the rear entrance. He shifted himself slightly to reach for a cigarette. From this new position, in the flame of the match, he saw the newcomer. She was young, with yellow hair and a pinched face slashed with a streak of rouge that somewhere concealed a mouth. Herregat was not interested in her. He looked for a man. Before he could turn away she looked back at him and smiled, an uncertain, quavering smile. He returned her smile and made room for her next to him. It wouldn't do not to pick her up. It would be too conspicuous.

He ordered a drink for her. She was much too young. The bartender should have refused to serve her. She slipped the drink dutifully, her face passive. She couldn't have liked it.

"Have you ever tasted good scotch?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know," she answered. "This tastes alright. I usually drink coffee."

"Would you rather have coffee?"

"This is alright," she said again.

The door opened and a man alone entered the bar. He was not the man Herregat wanted.

"What do you do?" he asked the girl for something to say.

"I work in the burlesque theater across the alley," she answered. "I usually come over here for coffeee between shows." Herregat thought he had covered every burlesque house in the area. Had he missed one or was she new? He found out he'd missed one. She had been working in it for three months.

He said, "I'd like to see your show."

Something in her eyes receeded. The pinched look in her face grew a little tighter.

"All you have to do is buy a ticket," she said. She slipped down from the bar stool. "I've got to get back. The next show starts in ten minutes." She paused. "Thanks for the drink, Mister." She was gone.

He paid for the drinks and shuffled slowly through the bar, once more scanning the faces in the smoky depths.

Outside, a fine mist was falling. Gusts of wind shoveled up paper and scraps in the littered street, dropping them in sudden calm as if at once aware of their filth.

He rounded the corner and saw the brassy neon lights of the burlesque theater. Her picture was not on any of the posters. She was probably too new, just learning. Rotten thing. She couldn't have been more than eighteen.

He walked up to the ticket booth. Deep under the marquee, by the lobby doors, a man stood, his back to the street, fists clamped together behind him. Herregat waited while

the girl in the cage fumbled for change. The man turned. Herregat felt his throat constrict, pushing the air back into his lungs.

The girl said, in a nasal, plaintive voice, "There you are, sir. I'm not so good at this. I'm only pinch hitting tonight. . . ."

Herregat gave her a brief, thin smile.

"You're doing fine," he said. stuffing the change into his pocket. He walked slowly toward the man.

So it was this easy. The weeks of hunting, the absurd infeasibility of the search, the soul gnawing refusal to abandon it, all these things seemed suddenly to shrink. It seemed somehow as if he hadn't been looking for him at all, as if he had just run into him, accidentally, here in the doorway of a third run burlesque house.

The man was looking at him without recognition. Herregat had testified only briefly, and at the time he had worn a crew cut, an expensive business suit and a bandage over his left eye for some minor optical surgery that had coincided with the event of the trial. His face had been drawn and tormented and the monosyllables he had uttered were hollow with pain and rage, sounding strange even to his own ears. Alex Ratch had no cause for recognition.

Herregat looked at the long, thin face that seemed to slant forward from the sides of his skull to a center crease, as if it had once lain flat and someone had folded it down the middle. He looked like a rodent, a lean, hungry rodent, pausing for speculation in the watery lights of the marquee. Herregat had cause for recognition.

He paused, not three feet from Ratch, feeling the ticket between his thumb and forefinger. He couldn't use it. Frantically, like an urgent hound snuffling for a scent, his mind started for a stall.

He pulled the ticket out, fingered it, shifted his feet. Ratch was watching him. Herregat looked up, directly into the other man's face.

"Know any of those girls in there?" he said, hitching his head toward the interior of the building.

A look skittered across Ratch's face. The full, almost pointed lips parted and he wiped them with a thick tongue.

"Yeah, buddy," he said slowly. "I know 'em. What's it to you?"

"There's a pretty one," Herregat said. "Blonde. Young, kinda skinny."

Ratch nodded. A spasm seemed to tug at his lips. It was a smile, twisted and filthy.

Herregat said, "I just bought her a drink. I want to see her again."

"You got the ticket, buddy. Go see her."

"I don't mean that. I've seen dames before. I liked this one. I want to . . . buy her another drink. . . ."

"You got the price of another drink?"

"Yeah. I got the price."

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't. We'll see." Ratch inclined his head revealing the depth of the bald area which left only a narrow rim of closely cropped gray hair.

"Go on in," he said. "I'll meet you out here with her after the show."

Panic clutched Herregat. He couldn't let Ratch out of his sight. He might lose him.

"I don't care about the show," Herregat said, quickly. "I only wanted to meet the girl. I'll buy you a drink while we wait."

Ratch looked at Herregat in his cheap, obviously new clothes. He looked at the ticket Herregat crumpled and tossed away.

"Let's go," he said.

For Herregat the next hour was one of staggering self-discipline. He sat next to this man, he talked to him, listened to him, breathing the same close air. With the icy deliberation of necessity he regarded him from some plateau beyond the boiling in his brain, as a human animal.

He learned that Ratch was managing the burlesque house, that the girl in some way was controlled by Ratch and that he had a price tag on her. Further than that Ratch had little to tell. It didn't matter. Herregat knew the rest.

Ratch asked him questions. Herregat's carefully prepared answers were casual and convincing. His name, he said smoothly, was Sam Bingham. He had only been in town a couple of weeks. He was from Florida. He was broke. Ratch's eyebrows flew up bringing his face to an even sharper point.

"If you're broke, buddy, you shouldn't buy burly-q tickets and throw 'em away. You shouldn't be interested in girls like Nada, playing a big shot buying drinks. . . ."

Herregat interrupted, his voice gliding to a condescending level. "I'm never going to be that broke, friend. . . . What's your name anyway?"

Ratch was impressed. He almost smirked. "My friends just call me Ratch," he said. Herregat was surprised. He had expected any name but the man's own. In a cess pool it probably didn't matter. Everything was the same color anyway.

At two a.m. they left to pick up Nada. Behind them, the bar closed. In the alley, the fine mist had turned to a drizzling rain. Herregat paused at the stage door to ask, "What's the pitch on Nada?"

"She's my girl," Ratch snickered, "but I'm not the jealous type. And she does what I tell her." His full pink lips curled up. "Maybe we could arrange a loan."

New and old revulsions swung at Herregat's stomach punching a hard knot of wrath and nausea. Herregat kept the contempt out of his voice.

"Things that tough, Ratch?" His words came out softly, sympathetically.

"Things are lousy," the other man

said. "I got about three steady customers. Drunks. Come in to sleep it off. And practically a one girl show. Nada. She's the only one that shows up two nights running. Things are real lousy. The rate we're going the joint will close any minute now."

"Yeah." Herregat's nod was gentle. "What did you do before?"

Ratch peered at him through the leaky red light of the stage door. There seemed to be promise and purpose in Herregat's questions. As Ratch hesitated, Herregat moved impatiently, his expression changing. He turned a flat face to Ratch, his interest gone.

"How long is this dame going to keep us waiting? It's raining."

Ratch said quickly, "I put a couple of years in the pen. Just a little thing. Nothing much. Got out three months ago. I used to be in show business. I guess I lost my touch. It's not going so well." He finished on a whine.

Nada pushed through the stage door followed by the shrill voices of angry females.

"Where've you been?" she addressed Ratch testily. "Susie and that Mexican are fighting over the drummer again. You'd better get in there before they kill each other." She looked at Herregat.

"What's he doing here?" she said.

The voices grew louder. Vile curses eddied through the door. There was a staccato snapping of words and a scream.

Ratch bleated, "He's Sam, honey. A friend of mine. Take him home. I'll meet you as soon as I close up." He turned and plunged into the theatre.

"All right, break it up, you two. . . ." The heavy door thumped shut, quieting the night.

Herregat's brain, like a defective record, still spun the words, "Just a little thing, nothing much. . . ."

The girl looked at him.

"What's the matter with you?" she said.

He looked at her, seeing her face slowly through the rain, the smear of red across her mouth, the pale tight skin, the heavily mascared eyelids sagging under false eyelashes. Her yellow hair was getting wet. He unclenched his fists. The knuckles of his fingers felt sore.

"You're supposed to take me home," he said softly. "Let's go."

They took the alley, hurrying along silently in the rain. She picked a pair of concrete steps and they descended to the basement of an old apartment house. Pressing a key in the lock of the door, she stood back to let him through. Carefully she locked the door behind them.

He followed her up three flights of stairs coming at last to a long narrow corridor where the carpeting was threadbare and the bare electric bulb in the center socket threw off a bleak cast of shadows. She unlocked another door and let him in.

"I'm glad you're with me," she said, turning to him. "Those stairs always scare me when I come home alone."

"Do you come home alone often?"

"No, I usually wait for him." She took off her coat and waited for him to hand her his.

The room was small and ugly. The furniture slouched under worn, soiled clip covers and wooden surfaces bore the scars of cigarette burns and glass rings.

On one side of the room an archway suspended a rod from which a curtain hung. She pushed the curtain back revealing a bed and a dresser and a wash basin. Next to the wash basin a hot plate was set up on a small shelf. She rinsed a coffee pot and filled it with water and set it on the burner. Then she went to the dresser. Leaning close to the mirror, she peeled off the false eyelashes, laying them carefully in a little box.

"Sit down," she called to Herregat. "Make yourself at home. He won't be here for another hour." She giggled softly. "If Susie and the Mexican don't kill him first," she added.

He watched her daub cold cream on her face and wipe it off. She combed her wet hair. The yellow of it was the only bright thing in the room.

When she came back the coffee had started to perk. He was grateful for its smell, lightly covering the other odors of stale dirt and musty age.

She looked prettier now and even younger. Her face without make-up lost the thin, pinched look. She looked delicate, almost fragile. It hurt him to see her look so civilized.

She moved to a sagging chair and sat down opposite him.

"We'll have to wait awhile for the coffee," she said, folding her hands in her lap. She sat there silently, childlike, patiently waiting for the coffee. The ache she had awakened in his heart stretched, yawned and sat up, filling him with pain.

He bent his head to light a cigarette. He wondered if what he would do to Ratch would hurt her. He didn't want to hurt her. She reminded him of Lila.

"How did you get started in burlesque?" he asked.

"He needed me," she answered.

"You mean Ratch?"

She nodded.

He said, "Where are you from?"

"Here," she said. "I was born here." She might have meant there in that very room.

He heard a key turn in the lock. At the sound, a brief terror swept her face, fading, when she saw it was Ratch. He stood by the door, the corners of his mouth digging into his cheeks in a slow smile.

"Well," he said, "Looks like a salvation army meeting here. What you two need is a little drink." He

tugged at his coat pocket, extracting a bottle of gin.

"Gotta drink it straight," he said apologetically to Herregat. "No ice in this joint."

Nada got up and walked to the coffee pot.

"I made coffee," she said, "and I'm going to drink it."

Ratch slipped out of his coat in a boneless movement. Herregat was reminded again of a rodent as the man crossed the room, the flatness of his body more like a shadow than a man. Ratch's arm circled the girl's waist, his hand crouching high under her breast.

"Come on, baby," he murmured, "A little drink will do you good."

She pushed him away and stepped back.

"I don't want a drink," she retorted flatly. "That stuff makes me sick. I want a cup of coffee."

Herregat could not take much more. He must accomplish the thing he set out to do, fast, before the bubbling loathing boiled over. He jerked himself into control. The rest was easy. So easy.

"I'll take coffee, too," he said, quietly. "I never mix liquor with business and I've got a little business proposition for you, Ratch."

Ratch's gaze slid to Herregat and back to Nada. He seemed to have only one smile. A filthy one.

"That's right," he said deprecatively, "but I thought a little drink might help." He eyed Nada again significantly.

"That's pleasure, Ratch," Herregat said, returning his gaze. "I'm talking about business."

Ratch looked bewildered. "Yeah," he said, "but I thought . . ."

"I think so, too. Later. Are you interested in half a quarter of a million?"

Ratch blinked. He stared dumbly at Herregat.

"Well, are you?" Herregat said, impatiently.

Ratch sat down slowly. "Yeah, Sam, yeah. I'm interested. Did you say a quarter of a million?"

"I said *half* a quarter of a million."

Ratch still stared at Herregat. "Sure, sure. Half." He wet his lips.

"Look, Sam, if this is your idea of a joke. . . ." His eyes clouded over with a mean look.

"This is no joke, Ratch," Herregat said roughly. "I've been on ice in Florida. I just got out. I need money." He looked around the room distastefully. "You need money. The pen was better than this. . . ."

Nada walked between them with the coffee.

"Get the hell out of here," Ratch snapped at her. "Go to bed."

She set Herregat's coffee down and left a cup for Ratch. Her eyes, glancing from one man to the other, settled briefly on Ratch. She looked weary and pinched again. She left the room in silence, pulling the alcove curtains behind her.

Herregat gulped his coffee. It was scalding hot. It slid down his throat burning a fire trail to his stomach.

Outside, the light rain gently nosed the silence. The sound of an occasional passing car broke faintly against the wet pavement like the crashing of a surf.

Herregat set his cup down. "Florida's no good for me right now," he said. "They were watching every move I made. I had to get out. I've got a plan but I need a partner. And I don't make friends easy."

Ratch's face remained passive. There was only the flash of excitement in his eyes.

"What's the plan?" he said.

Herregat ignored the question. He leaned back, resting his head against the lumpy cushion behind him. He watched Ratch through half closed eyes.

"You can't get caught, Ratch," he said. "This is clean with somebody else taking the rap."

Ratch's tongue shot out to lick his lips again. He raised the cup to his mouth, his hand shaking slightly.

Herregat said, "I've spent the last couple of weeks going over the plan. I've got the spot laid out and the timing down to a split second. Your job is to say a few words, walk two and a half blocks, and look innocent. Think you can manage it?"

"Yeah," Ratch said. "I can manage it. When do we go to work?"

"Do you have a gun?"

Ratch nodded.

"Get it," Herregat said.

Ratch got up and walked stiffly toward the alcove. He disappeared for a moment and came back with a .38 revolver. He laid it down on the table between them.

"Pawn shop," he said. "It works and it's loaded."

Herregat reached for it and Ratch made a convulsive movement.

"Take it easy, Ratch," Herregat said. "I just want to make sure." He opened the chamber, emptied it, spun it, and slowly replaced the bullets. All he had to do was raise the barrel of the gun six inches, just six inches. . . . His knuckles were white over the gun butt. When he laid it back on the table the palms of his hands were wet.

"Okay, Ratch," he said. "I'm going to tell you the plan. Then I'm going to spend the rest of the night here in this chair by that gun."

He paused, waiting. Ratch didn't object.

"Alright," he said. "Here it is. Tomorrow morning we're going to the post office. At eleven fifty, two men will come out the back door. They'll walk close together across the postal loading zone and out to the street. They'll turn right and walk two and a half blocks to a bank on the corner. They've got a little black bag between them. There's a quarter of a million dol-

lars in that bag. Cash. From the sale of bonds, insurance, money orders . . . They wear plain clothes. They're armed—with shoulder holsters."

There were sounds in the hall, footsteps, the short muffled laughter of a woman, the blurred words of a man. A door closed and there was silence again.

Herregat continued quietly. "Every morning a delivery boy for a publishing company parks his car in a metered parking space on the street at the end of the postal loading zone. He goes into the post office and stays there twenty minutes. Then he comes out and drives the car away."

Herregat paused to light a cigarette. Ratch sat very still. Beads of sweat glistened in the little pockets under his eyes.

"Your job," Herregat went on, "is to persuade the two men to drop that black bag in the delivery boy's car. Then you'll turn them around and walk them as usual to the bank. As you pass the car, walking behind them, you'll toss the gun in with the bag. When you get to the bank, go in with them. Go to the money order window. You won't get a chance to do anything. Your boys will start hollering hold-up. You're an innocent bystander. When the police get back to the car there won't be a black bag or a gun. You won't be armed when they frisk you. The cops won't find anything but a quarter of a million missing and two men with a cock and bull story. They'll go to jail for postal robbery and faking a hold-up."

Ratch wiped his face, dragging some of the sweat off with his hand.

"What about the dough?" he said.

"I'll meet you back here with the money and the gun when the cops are off your back."

"How do I know you don't take the money and beat it?"

"That's a chance you take. You've got nothing to loose. Unless you put in time for robbery."

Ratch shook his head.

"Then you can scream persecution. Just because you've been in jail the boys with the bag are trying to frame you for robbery. It's a sweet set up, Ratch. And it's too late to back out." Herregat's gaze flicked in cold menace to the gun on the table.

Ratch blinked and took a noisy swallow of coffee.

"What if something goes wrong? That's a federal rap. I'd get twenty five years."

"You'll wrap your gun hand in your handkerchief. If anything goes wrong, you toss the gun in the back of the car and act like these guys are having a bad dream. You're still the innocent bystander and there are no prints on the gun."

"Yeah," Ratch breathed, satisfied. "Real sweet. Do we split?"

"We split," Herregat replied.

They went over it again and still a third time. Ratch repeated the whole thing back to Herregat, the excitement of greed blazing in his face.

Finally Ratch, confident and avid, disappeared behind the curtains. Herregat sat through the remaining night, silent and sleepless. He felt suspended in time and space, waiting. His mind could not seem to go forward, beyond this minute. And he dared not let it go back. Not with that gun on the table and Ratch in the next room.

Dawn, gray and murky, filtered in through the windows. It rained intermittantly. Herregat got up and moved about the room, stretching his legs. It seemed not a short or a long wait. Only a fact of time that must pass.

At a quarter of ten someone stirred behind the curtains. Nada emerged a few minutes later. She wore a pair of slacks and fumbled with the buttons of a flannel shirt. She shot him a glance and walked over to the gas burner against the wall.

"It's cold in here," she said, a shiver catching at her shoulders. She struck a match. The burner lit with a small roaring sound and gas fumes filled the air. She raised the window and lifted a soaked carton of eggs and a can of milk with the label dangling, from the ledge.

"You want some breakfast?" she said.

He said, "No, thanks."

She set the eggs and milk down and glanced at the gun on the table.

"Is it alright with you if I go to the bathroom?"

He nodded. While she was gone Ratch got up.

Back in the room, Nada fixed breakfast. Ratch ate hungrily, chewing nervously and swallowing hard. Herregat and Nada drank coffee.

No one said much. Ratch gave Nada some instructions about the theater. She listened silently, without answering.

As they left she stood watching them, slender and young and shabby with the yellow hair falling in disarray around her still, closed face.

The loading zone behind the post office narrowed to a low walled driveway that emptied on the street. Trees and shrubberry grew in regulated profusion along the driveway and fanned out along the street to conceal the massive parking lot behind them. Herregat and Ratch approached this area at exactly eleven forty nine. With a nod of his head Herregat indicated the designated car and kept walking. Raindrops snagged the air in a half drizzle, half mist. The sky was gray and thick. Herregat moved into the shelter of a tall shrub, pausing to light a cigarette.

He saw the two men walk down the driveway and turn onto the sidewalk, the little black bag between them. He saw Ratch ap-

proach them from behind. The trio stood motionless for an instant, then Ratch moved in close and Herregat saw the black bag swing through the open window of the car. The trio moved forward and a moment later, the gun, a black spot in the center of the window, fell out of sight with the bag. They walked to the end of the block in tight formation, and disappeared around the corner of the building.

Herregat stood motionless for a moment, staring at the car, the empty sidewalk. With an air of finality he turned, leaving the car and the post office behind.

The branches of a tall shrub moved, spitting a huddle of raindrops; Nada emerged.

"What are you doing?" she said, her voice husky with fear. "You didn't take the money or the gun."

He looked at her, not answering.

Alarm bolted into her eyes. She took a step back, swung out around him and made a dash for the car. He whirled and grabbed her wrist, pulling her toward him in an angry wrench.

"Leave it," he said roughly, "It's better to be an honest burlesque dancer."

She lifted a white face to him, struggling to free herself. Her eyes were wild. "Let me go," she muttered, yanking at her arm. He tightened his fingers on her wrist till he heard her gasp.

She stopped struggling and turned to him, pleading.

"I don't want the money. It's not the money. I've got to get that bag out of the car. He'll go to jail. Don't you see? He'll go to . . ." Her eyes widened. A sob caught in her throat.

"You planned it that way, didn't you? You planned it. Let me go. Let me go!" She pulled again, violently, on her arm.

"Listen to me!" he ordered gruffly. "Do you know why Ratch went to jail?"

"Yes," she moaned, frantic. "I know why. Let me go, oh please let me go."

He pulled her close to him, doubling her arm up under his. He lowered his face, dark with rage, to hers. "He went to jail on a child molestation charge. It was my child he molested. She was five years old. She still wakes up screaming in the night. Twenty five years in jail is too good for him. I should have killed him last night!"

She looked at him, her eyes, glazed with fear, uncomprehending. "Let me go," she pleaded, her voice throttled to a whisper. She strained at her arm, clamped under his, pushing until her knees bent under her. Her face, beneath his, contorted with panic. "He's my father," she choked out. "Let me go, oh please let me go."

"Jesus Christ," Herregat breathed. His hand went limp on her arm. She tore away from him streaking toward the car. She yanked the case and the gun out

and plunged into the street. The brakes of a car screamed. She spun around and reached the sidewalk, racing away from Herregat. A prowl car slammed to a stop at the corner. Two policemen piled out.

There was a shout of, "Halt!" Nada whirled and started back toward Herregat. A gun exploded. Two motorcycles, sirens wailing, rounded the opposite corner and screached to a stop a few yards in front of Nada. She screamed—and the hand holding the gun shot forward, firing wildly. She fired four times. Another shot ripped the air. The bag dropped from Nada's hand. She stood straight for a moment, her head flung back, her yellow hair spotting the rain. Then slowly, almost softly, she crumpled to the sidewalk, a small, dark heap on the wet concrete. The gun lay beside her, gasping thin little wisps of smoke.

The street so quiet and empty a few minutes ago, was suddenly alive with people. There were shouts, excited talk . . . and clusters of silence, awed at the sight of death.

Herregat caught a glimpse of Ratch, handcuffed to an officer, climbing into a squad car. The squad car pulled out and an ambulance whined into the spot it left.

Herregat turned up his collar. A bitter chill swept through him. He turned, unnoticed, and walked away.

With each carefully doled out ration the sled grew lighter. He no longer needed six dogs to pull it. He killed Lady with one stroke of his axe. The half-starved dogs went wild at the scent of blood. "Dog eat dog!" he laughed aloud.

IT WAS EASY to kill a man.

He waited until Fleming stooped over to pick up some kindling, then he hit him very hard on the back of the head with the flat of the axe. Dragging the body down to the frozen river was much harder. Fleming was a big man, and his broken ankle hurt him, but after a while he got the knack of digging his crutch deep in the snow and using it for leverage. The waterhole had a thin pane of ice over it, but the body broke through it and the deep current carried it away.

He sat down and gazed at the dark, empty hole and rested his throbbing ankle.

BY GEORGES CAROUSSO

DOG EAT DOG

"I should have taken his mittens," he reproached himself. "They were better than mine."

It wasn't a serious loss and anyway it was too late now. The river had the body. There would be very little left of it—or the mittens—when break-up came and the ice ground it to bits in the spring torrent. The bears, wolves, wolverines and ravens would take care of anything that was left. Even if anyone found the bones, which was not likely in this wilderness, there would be no marks on them that could not be attributed to the river. No one would ever question his story that Fleming had stepped through some rotten ice and drowned. That's why he hadn't used a bullet. That's why he hadn't used the sharp edge of the axe.

His plan was perfect. He was not a man who made mistakes. He was not Fleming. He was not an oaf born and living in the wilderness. He was a geologist who used the wilderness for what he could take from it to enjoy later in the world outside.

Fleming had made too many mistakes. His first was in having a wife as beautiful as Nina back at the settlement. His second was in leaving the two of them alone so much while he was busy getting the outfit together and caring for the dogs. The next was in not suspecting them.

If those were the only mistakes Fleming had made he might not have killed him. He didn't have to kill a stupid ox like that to take his wife away for a while. But Fleming was a man born to make mistakes and, eventually, to die for them. Like lording it over him through the whole trip . . . laughing at him for not being as strong . . . as good on snowshoes . . . as good a shot . . . as good with an axe. Like making him break his ankle . . . and making a cripple out of him for the rest of his life. And all because he had kicked the dog Lady when she snapped at him, and then used the butt of his dog whip on Buck when the big brute had gone for his throat.

Fleming had made such a stink over this little incident that they had come to fists and boots over it, like a couple of drunks in a bar room brawl. During the fight his ankle had caught under a sled runner and broken.

Setting his ankle so badly and then refusing to take him out to civilization to have it properly reset was the last fatal mistake Fleming had made.

"I did the best I could with it," Fleming said. "It's four hundred miles to Rocky Rapids and blizzard weather is ahead of us. We've got to wait until the blizzards are over and the snow packs down some. We couldn't make it now. The dogs couldn't pull both you and enough to last us through the trip. Not through blizzard snow, they couldn't."

"But I might be crippled for life," he had protested.

"You'll live! Fleming had laughed at him. "Maybe you'll walk with a limp. Maybe the gals won't come swarming after you any more. But there's worse things can happen to a man in this country . . ."

Ice was forming its crystals on the dark water hole now.

"How right you were, my friend," he said aloud and chuckled. "How right!"

Speaking aloud was part of his plan. It would break the silence and keep the dogs from sensing his fear. He was not a fool. He realized that on the long trail back to the settlement, he was bound to feel fear at times. But he must not show it to the dogs. They must always know that he was their master. Always.

It was sweet irony that Fleming himself had given him the seed that had developed into his perfect plan. Fleming had said that the dogs could not pull, through blizzard snow, enough food for themselves and two men.

"But why *two* men . . ." he had thought, and the first crystal had formed in the pattern. Yet, he had refused to accept it. He had tried to reason with Fleming. He had tried to spare Fleming's life.

"There's a way we can get out," he had insisted. "Amundsen used it in reaching the South Pole. He *used* his dogs. Really used them. Every bit of them. As he went on and his food supply grew smaller, it didn't take as many dogs to pull the sleds. So, he'd kill a dog and feed it to the other dogs, and . . ."

"Kill my dogs?" Fleming had roared at him. "Is that what you're trying to tell me? Kill my dogs to get you out just because you have a broken ankle?"

The crystals formed quickly on the pattern after that, as quickly as those now forming on the dark, empty hole in the river ice.

He knocked the cold ashes from his pipe, stood up with the aid of his crutch and hobbled to the crude shelter. Slowly, he loaded the sled with food, leaving barely enough space for himself to ride on it. Harnessing the dogs was difficult. They were restless, growling softly in their throats, as if the scent of the faint blood trail from the woodpile to the frozen river filled them with terror.

Lady turned her head and snapped at him, but she was staked and couldn't quite reach him. He regained his balance, and the next time she tried it, he was ready for her, and his crutch caught her on the side of the jaw. She lay stunned in the snow, and he used the whip on her, but not too hard. He needed her for a while longer. But when the time came, she would be the first to die. The dogs growled at the commotion and the fresh scent of blood. All but Buck. The huge lead dog lay on the snow with his head between his paws, and watched the man.

"Buck and Lady . . ." he said aloud. "Only a man like Fleming would have thought of two names like that!"

He had trouble getting the sled started. It was too heavily loaded, and the dogs were used to having a man help to get the sled in motion, or working ahead of them, breaking trail. But he managed to get them started at last, and led them to the river. In spite of its windings, it was safer to follow the river than to attempt the shorter overland route through the trackless barrens. On the river, the wind had piled the snow into high drifts, but there were spots between them that had been swept almost bare. He needed this thin layer of snow for the heavily packed sled, even though it meant meandering endlessly between the drifts.

He lay back in the nest of robes on the sled, and nursed his ankle, and dozed. The dogs plodded on slowly, but he did not use the whip on them. He was not anxious to drive them too fast. Speed consumed energy, and energy was food. Food was the basis of his plan of escape . . . food, used in logical, mathematical precision, the way Amundsen had used it.

In the days that followed, he fed himself well, and the dogs sparingly. He needed his strength. The dogs needed only enough food to serve out their purpose. He watched them carefully, as a miser might watch his only investment, studying their motions, the hollowness of their ribs, the signs of weakening, and fed them only enough to maintain a minimum balance.

The dogs grew steadily weaker, but with each carefully doled meal, the sled grew lighter. It no longer needed six dogs to pull it. Five would be sufficient. The sixth, instead of consuming food, now could become food.

"Dog eat dog," he laughed.

He killed Lady with one stroke of his axe through her backbone. The half-starved dogs went into a frenzy. Only Buck refused to eat her flesh. He just lay on the snow and watched the man.

It was hard for the remaining five dogs to pull the sled, but his ankle was getting stronger and he was able to help them a bit by bracing with his crutch and pushing the sled in motion. A few quiet snowfalls without wind filled the clear gaps between the drifts, and he was sometimes forced to go ahead of the dogs and break trail for them. Once, his crutch slipped on the ice beneath the snow and he stumbled and fell, and while still falling, he heard the wild cry of the dogs behind him. It was the cry of the pack sighting its prey.

He felt the impact of their bodies against him, and he rolled desperately in the snow, guarding his face and throat with his arms. The tangling harness and the weight of the sled against the dogs saved him, and he rolled free at last and

climbed to his feet, panting and trembling. The tangled dogs still struggled to get to him, and he hobbled a wide circle around them and got the rifle from the sled. The rage of being violated blinded him, and his first shot went wild, and the sudden sound and the sharp recoil of the gun shocked him back into logic.

"If I kill them, I'll die," he thought, and he laid the gun down and picked up the whip. Whipping them was better than squeezing the trigger of a rifle. It lasted longer.

He had to camp for three days while their wounds healed and they regained enough strength to pull the sled once more. He never broke trail for them again. He never turned his back to them again.

The sky changed and became ugly. It was not the usual darkness that preceded the normal, daily snowfall. It was a silence over the land, a complete absence of sound that gave him the feeling of being suspended in a vacuum. The dogs felt it, too. Even when they were resting, their heads would come up suddenly and turn in quick, jerking motions, as if an invisible insect was buzzing around their heads. Their eyes would focus into space, and they would stare at nothing and growl.

"They're seeing storm ghosts," he said, and tried to hurry them along, but there were only four of them now, and they could go no faster.

The silence disappeared. High above him, great masses of air stirred. They rolled and crashed like great silent ocean waves. The first sharp white flakes of their spray fell. The blizzards came.

He lost two days in that first storm. He lost many more days in the storms that followed. He lay huddled in his sleeping bag and robes, and waited through endless hours, afraid of wasting the dogs' energy that, in clearer weather, would cover more distance. Time . . . distance . . . Time lost all meaning in the translucent gloom. Distance did not exist in the infinite whiteness. Even when the storms diminished and he could travel once more, distance became a nothingness hemmed in by the ill-defined banks of a frozen river and a compass direction.

Once, he slept and when he woke, the dogs were traveling in the churned tracks where another dog team and sled had passed, and he thought that there was someone else ahead of him, a prospector or a trapper, and he whipped up the team to catch up. But the dogs were running easily and fast, following Buck's lead, and they hardly needed any whipping. Then, after hours passed, he felt sudden fear, and checked his compass and found that they were following their own back-track. In a rage, he aimed his rifle at Buck's heaving back, but he did not squeeze the trigger. Not yet. He needed Buck. Above all, he needed Buck.

He turned the team, and after a long while, he was on unmarked snow again.

Blizzards . . . blizards . . . blizzards! Was there no end to the amount of snow that could fall? No end to the howling wind . . . the cold . . . the gloom . . . the loneliness? Was there no end to the trail?

There had to be an end to the trail, and it had to be soon. He had only three dogs left now, and they were showing the full effect of the long trail and the lack of food. Buck, who had refused to eat the flesh of his companions, was the thinnest of all. His ribs pressed so sharply against his fur that the bones seemed exposed. Even his yellow eyes seemed sunken into his skull. But with the waning of his great strength, his spirit had broken. He followed commands easily. He no longer growled at the whip. He accepted it, as he accepted the small portions of food tossed to him.

"You're a coward," he said. "For all your size, you're just a coward." It pleased him to have discovered that. It somehow made him feel bigger and stronger.

He tossed the dog another morsel and watched him crawl toward it and snap it up, then cringe back again to stare up at him with begging yellow eyes. He did not waste any more food on Buck, in spite of the feeling of power that it gave him. The food supply was almost gone. In a few days, he would be forced to cut down on his own rations.

The blizzards ended, at last. Beneath the weak sun, the soft snow packed a little, and made traveling easier. But he had only Buck and one other dog left now to draw him and the empty sled, and he would have to kill that dog for food for himself. It did not matter. In spite of the delay of the blizzards, he was fulfilling the schedule of his plan. There were landmarks on the river bank that he recognized. He had come this far with Fleming when they took short trips to test out the dogs and their equipment. He was only three days from Rocky Rapids . . . perhaps four. Surely no longer than that. Buck could take him and the empty sled the rest of the way.

It was only after his axe had fallen on the other dog that he realized he had made his first mistake; his first miscalculation. The landmarks he recognized were only three or four days from Rocky Rapids . . . but for a full team! He had no team. He had only Buck, and Buck was hardly more than a skeleton.

He tried to get Buck to share the other dog's flesh with him, but Buck cringed away to the length of his harness.

"All right, starve and be damned to you!" he shouted. "But you'll draw this sled until you drop!"

And Buck did. He drew the sled and the man until hardly ten miles of trail were left to the settle-

ment, and then another blizzard struck and he could go on no farther. His legs gave out from under him and he sank slowly to the snow, his body thrust forward between his legs as if he were crouched to meet the force of the wind.

The man picked up his whip, then hesitated. It would be no use. Buck had reached the end of the trail . . . but not quite! Alive, he could no longer be of any use to him. There remained only the final part that the dog could play; the last bit of himself that he could contribute to the perfect pattern of murder and escape.

There were only ten miles left to the settlement. A well-fed man could make them, in spite of the blizzard and the handicap of a crutch. He dropped the whip and picked up his axe.

The driving wind lashed across his face as he moved towards the dog that was almost invisible in the drifting snow. As he lifted his arms, he saw the yellow eyes open and look into his own. He saw them like great suns that loomed suddenly in the gloom and exploded toward him in a blinding flash of brilliance.

Too late, he swung the axe.

Two days after the last big blizzard of the year ended, a big black and white husky limped into Rocky Rapids. Those who gathered around him could see that he had been on a long, hard trail. His paws were cut and bleeding from running on river ice. His belly fur was patchy from being frozen in ice melted beneath him by his body heat. What they couldn't figure out was the harness strap still hanging on him. It had not been chewed through. It was clean-cut, as if a knife or an axe had parted it. And they couldn't figure out the slash on the dog's shoulder, so deep that the bone beneath showed.

But the thing that puzzled them most was that the dog showed no interest in the food they brought him. He was as full as a tick.

LITTLE NAPOLEON

BURKE and Big Joe lay in the shade of the ring-toss booth. Big Joe nudged Burke. "What a dish," he said, hunger in his voice.

Burke opened his one good eye to see Colonel Bonaparte and Gloria coming out of the freak, or ten-in-one top. The colonel wasn't the dish; the colonel was a midget. The dish was Gloria and she looked out of place on the hot, dusty midway. Tall, she was the show-girl type, blond and with sex built into every motion of her long rythmical figure. "Lay off the weed, boy," Burke grunted. "That stuff ain't for canvasmen."

"Just dreaming," Big Joe said, "just dreaming."

Burke watched the couple cross the sawdust, the colonel's short legs taking three steps to every one sweep of Gloria's long silken clad leg.

"Do you suppose somebody put the Colonel up to that?" Big Joe said.

"I don't figure it's my business."

"I hear that Zeerah is moving in there," Big Joe said. "What do you think?"

"The way I keep my nose clean is to keep it out of other people's business." Burke reached behind him and pulled the bottle out from under the sidewall. He took a long drink, his eyes still on the colonel and Gloria. Maybe Big Joe was right. He had caught a glimpse of the midget's face and it had been

BY

LEO ELLIS

It was a David and Goliath battle, carny style. Not heroic . . . but sordid and deadly.

twisted up with suppressed anger. Burke couldn't tell a thing about Gloria, her face was always smooth and expressionless.

Burke didn't think it was strange that a man only three feet tall should get himself a woman five feet nine inches—not when the guy was a midget. That was how midgets operated; Gloria was the colonel's showpiece, his open defiance against his size. That girl was something every red-blooded man wanted, but who had her? She belonged to Colonel Bonaparte and he let the world know it, and that made him as big as anybody else. Midgets were that way, Burke thought, always out to prove they were as big as the next guy, or even bigger.

"The colonel takes good care of her," Big Joe said, "at least as far as clothes go." He slipped the bottle out and raised it to his lips.

Burke grabbed the bottle and slid it back under the canvas. "He has to keep her satisfied someway," he said. He looked across to where the banner line was strung along the front of the ten-in-one show. There on canvas panels, side by side, were the painted pictures of both Colonel Bonaparte and Zeerah. The midget was described as being the world's smallest human. Zeerah was shown with hatpins stuck through his cheeks, his arms and threaded through the flesh of his chest. The caption under his picture said; "Emperor of Torture—The Man Without Feeling."

Burke knew that if Zeerah was moving in on Colonel Bonaparte's territory that could mean trouble, for the two men were partners and owned the ten-in-one show together.

"It's going to take more than clothes to keep that number satisfied," Big Joe said.

"It's no skin off my rump either way."

Burke was behind the tops the next afternoon when he saw the colonel coming down the stake line toward him. The midget's legs were a blur and his sports jacket stood out behind him, and Burke stepped out of his way when he saw the little man's face. He turned with the others to watch the midget storm his way to Zeerah's long, shiny house trailer.

Tessie the fat lady sat out in front of her living tent and looked. The knife thrower and the fire eater stopped pitching horseshoes to watch; and even the geek, chained to a stake, grinned in foolish anticipation.

The midget didn't knock, he clawed the door open then crawled into the trailer. There was a short dead silence before Colonel Bonaparte's high pitched scream of rage. The sound of a scuffle followed, then Zeerah appeared at the door, holding the midget out at arm's length by the collar of his jacket. Zeerah was big, with black curly hair and he grinned at the squirming, cursing Colonel Bonaparte.

"You peanut!" Zeerah said, "you pin prick! you threaten Zeerah?" He threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Listen, mouse-meat," he said, "you didn't have what it took to do a man sized job, so now Zeerah takes over."

Burke saw Gloria in the trailer, behind Zeerah, and her face had no more expression on it than usual.

Zeerah shook the midget like a puppy. "If you try to cause trouble," he said, "I'll squash you like a fly." He released his hold and Colonel Bonaparte dropped to the ground to land on all fours.

The geek jumped up and down, rattling his chains and shrieked with idiotic laughter.

Burke caught the freak show that night to see if both men were working. The midget was there, sitting alone on his platform, his face white and set. Zeerah was there too, pushing the hatpins through his flesh to the horrified gasps of the suckers; so satisfied, Burke ambled over to the snake pit in the center of the tent.

Serpentine the snake charmer was a friend of Burke and she always spoke to him. She was a thin girl with dyed red hair and now she stopped stroking the boa to reach down into the front of her dress. "I guess I still owe you for this month," she said. She pulled out a grouch bag hung by a cord around her neck, opened it and took out a ten dollar bill.

Burke nodded. Serpentine paid him to sleep back in the tent and keep an eye on her snakes. The boa, the bull snakes and the rattlers didn't need attention, it was the coral snake. The coral was the star of Serpentine's act. "The coral snake is rarely found in captivity," she would say in her spiel. "It is the most poisonous reptile found in the United States and is directly related to the world's most deadly serpents —the cobra, the tiger snake and the death adder."

Now, Burke couldn't see the two foot snake, it had burrowed down into the moss on the bottom of the square glass case. The vicious thing would stay there until Serpentine turned on the light underneath, then it would slither up for the towners to gawk at. The coral would die if the temperature went below seventy five degrees, so the case was heated and it was Burke's job to check the thermometer twice each night.

Burke bought a bottle with the ten, then went into town, so it was late and the carney was dark when he got back to the lot. He picked up the flap at the back of the ten-in-one top, and as he stepped in he saw a hooded flashlight bobbing in front of the platforms.

Burke backed into the shadows and dug his fist into his one good eye to clear his vision, but the light was still there. Now it crossed over and cautiously poked under the canvas drop where Burke slept. Then as though satisfied, it moved

toward the center of the tent. By now, from the height of the flashlight from the ground, Burke realized that it must be held by Colonel Bonaparte. Hell, he thought, the guy had a right to be here since he owned half of the show.

The flashlight was in the snake pit when it went out, then there was an eerie green glow as the light under the moss in the glass case was snapped on. Hypnotized, Burke moved forward in the darkness as the midget's face appeared over the glass, the tiny features set in greenish determination. Slowly, the colonel slid the glass top back a few inches, then pushed a rod with a bulb mass on the end down through the opening.

Then Burke saw the coral, first the black tipped head, then the body with red and black rings; the black rings bordered by narrow bands of yellow. The snake moved in a sluggish, torpid manner, as though aroused from a sleep.

The midget had leaned over so the upper part of his body was bathed in green light. He poked the bulb mass at the snake, his face held so close to the opening his nose was pressed against the glass. The coral shifted uneasily, as if afraid of the object before it; then with lightning speed, it struck, the jaws chewing with savage fury.

The struggle between the little man and the small snake was titanic in its intensity. Writhing and chewing, the coral was clamped to the bulb mass. Frantically, the midget yanked at the rod, then whipped it around inside the case until the coral's contorted body was beaten against the glass. Grunts and muttered curses were the only sounds in the big tent.

The glass case toppled and would have fallen, but Colonel Bonaparte grabbed it, to hold case and stand steady while he fought to wrest the rod from the coral. Then, by working the rod back up through the opening slit, so the snake's jaws were forced against the glass top, the mass was finally torn free and the defeated snake dropped back into the moss.

To watch the struggle Burke had come out into the open, and when the flashlight snapped on again it was too late to duck back. The beam swung over to stop on his face, and Burke stared stupidly into the disc with his single eye. Then the light went out and he could hear the midget as he scurried across the tent and out through the back.

Burke checked the thermometer, it was eighty degrees in the case, that was all that was expected of him. He took a good long belt from the bottle and rolled up in his blanket.

There was a matinee the next afternoon, but Burke didn't go near the ten-in-one show. Then at around eight that evening. Big Joe found him in the cook shack.

"Something's wrong with Zee-

rah," Big Joe said, then when Burke didn't answer, he went on to explain. "Gloria was in town this afternoon," he said. "She got back a few minutes ago. Zeerah was unconscious in the trailer."

"Was it bad?" Burke set his coffee mug down.

Big Joe shrugged. "Bad enough they called the ambulance."

There was a crowd around the trailer and Burke knew that it was plenty bad when they took Zeerah off to the hospital. They never took any carnie to the hospital unless he was dead, or dying.

The next morning Big Joe told Burke that Zeerah was dead. "They think it was some kind of poison," he said, then squinted at Burke. "What do you think?"

"Maybe it was overloving," Burke said and walked away.

Back in the empty ten-in-one tent he studied the glass case where the coral was now buried in the moss. Then he looked over at the platform where Zeerah had performed his torture act. Slowly it came to him that if a piece of meat on the end of a rod was poked into the case, and the coral was made to fill it with poison while in a rage—then Zeerah's hatpins were smeared with enough of that venom—

Hell, Burke thought, all he could do was to swear that he had never seen Zeerah near the snake pit and that the coral had never been out of the case. He would be in the clear, Serpentina would be in the clear; besides, town clowns didn't bother much how a carnie died, as long as he did it on the lot.

A few minutes later Burke saw Colonel Bonaparte strutting down the midway with Gloria walking tall beside him. As they came near, Burke saw that the girl's right eye was puffed almost closed and was starting to change color. But her expression was still as placid and immobile as ever.

"Stay!" the midget told Gloria when they came abreast of Burke, then he came over and stood with his feet apart, his hands on his hips, looking up. "How much are you paid to sleep back in the show tent?" he asked.

"Ten bucks a months."

The midget pulled a fat wallet from his jacket pocket, took out a bill and handed it over. "Now that I'm the boss, it'll be twenty," he said. The colonel screwed up his little face at Burke. "Watch that coral," he said. "See that he doesn't get out."

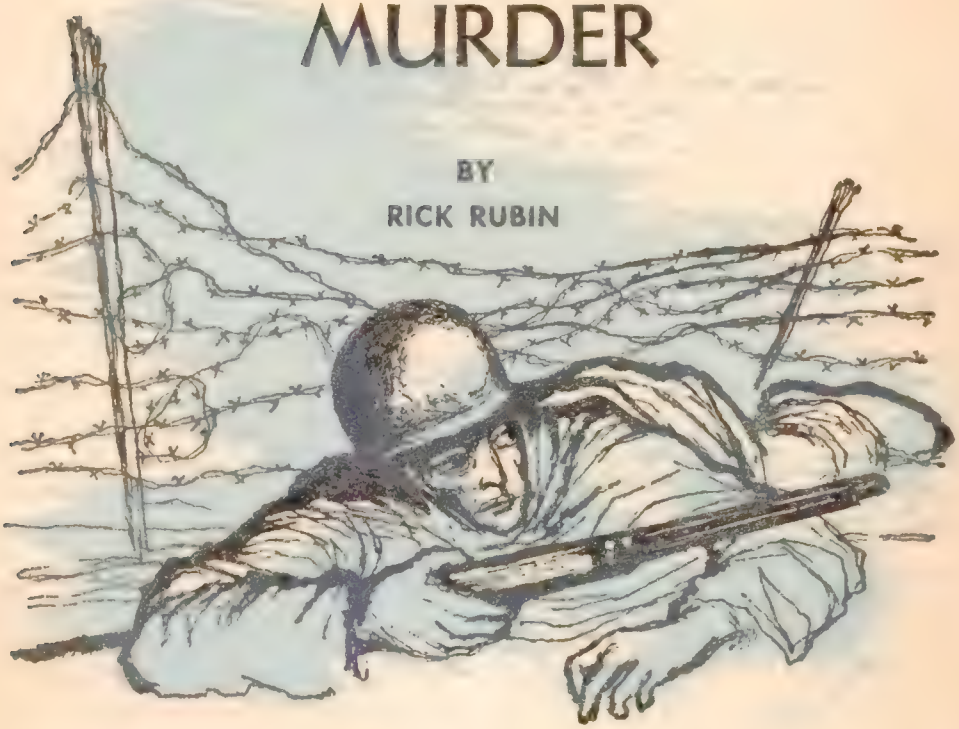
Burke blinked his one eye. "Okay, boss," he said. "The lid will stay on."

Big Joe came up as Colonel Bonaparte and Gloria walked on down the midway. "You lucky stiff," he said, then looked after the two. "How do you suppose he gave her that eye—stood on a chair?"

Private Masconi snaked his way down the infiltration course flattened under the hot whine of machine-gun fire and he wondered when Corporal Dixon's bullet would take him.

S.O.P. MURDER

BY
RICK RUBIN



PRIVATE MOSCONI was bending over the sink cleaning pots when Corporal Dixon came in and started harassing him. Mosconi was a short man and the pot was a deep one, and he had his head so deep inside that he did not even know the corporal was there until he said; "Wallopin' pots ought to be right up your line, city boy."

Then Mosconi straightened up and gave Dixon as hard and defiant a look as he was able to, being tired and dirty and sweat-soaked. The lanky corporal snickered by way of a laugh, but the straight hard mouth across his bony face didn't curve in any way related to humor.

"Yeh, sure, I'm an old hand at pot wallopin'," Mosconi said. "But I don't guess you ever saw no pots

before you came in the army. I guess they just eat food raw down in your country."

"Shut up and get to work," Dixon said, his joke turned back on him.

"Sure, Co-prahl," Mosconi said, mimicking a southern accent. "Anythin yo-all says, I'm bound to do."

"You're damn right you are," Dixon said, "And knock off the cute talk."

"I was just tryin' to say it so's you'd understand it," Mosconi said.

"Listen you punk," the corporal said, "You keep wising off like that and I'll have you on K.P. every weekend from now till doomsday. You won't never see daylight outside this camp again."

Mosconi muttered something under his breath and returned to his pot. "What'd you say, soljer?" Dixon said. "Wise goddamn city punk. Think you can get away with murder in the army like you could at home in your slum. Well I'll learn you. Army's bigger than guys like. I'll learn you."

"Like hell I'm trying to get away with anything," Mosconi said, turning again from his pot. "You're the one who started this. Just because I don't happen to come from the same ridge you . . ."

"Get back to work, boy, or I'll have you up in front of the old man so fast your head'll spin."

Mosconi scoured the pot and Dixon stood behind him snickering and delivering little lectures until he became bored with Mosconi and strolled out of the kitchen. Then Mosconi straightened up and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He watched the cadreman stroll lazily across toward the orderly room, and cursed him silently. He would like to land just one good punch on Dixon's lantern jaw. Just once he'd like to . . .

It was Sunday afternoon and the camp was deserted. Mosconi snaked a hand in his pocket and found his watch. Five-thirty. He was off duty at ten, but by then it would be too late to make it into town. He'd be starting another week of training without even an hour of rest.

Six weeks of Basic Training finished, two more to pull. Then freedom, at least from Corporal Dixon. Dixon had been on his back since the middle of the first week, when the cadreman began to know the names and backgrounds of the men in his platoon. The minute he discovered that Mosconi was from the city he'd started bad-mouthing him, softly at first and then, when he found that Mosconi wouldn't take a lot of crap without fighting back, a lot harder. Dixon seemed to butter up the college boys in the platoon, maybe figuring that they might be officers some day, and he left most of the trainees alone, but two or three he picked out for special treatment, and Mosconi for the most special.

To hell with him, Mosconi thought. I've stood worse than this, I can stand this for two more weeks. But he thought of how nice it would be to land a hard one on that lantern jaw of Dixon's. Oh sure, he thought, hit a non-com and see what it gets you in this army.

He returned to the pots and expended his fury on them, and by the time the mess sergeant came by he had a row of them glistening brightly on the center table of the kitchen.

"You're doing all right," the mess sergeant said. He was an older man, mostly bald and tired looking. "I'd let you take off, but Dixon would be in my hair for it. He put you on K.P. for punishment, not to get work done."

"Hell, I didn't do anything," Mosconi said.

"I know you didn't. But to Dixon you did something just by being who you are and where you're from. Every training cycle he picks out one or two guys from the city to ride. The guy last cycle couldn't take it and went awol."

"They catch him?"

"Yeh. He's in the stockade now. Dixon's happiest when he's pushed some city boy into something like that. He thinks he's proved that city boys aren't any good in the army."

"Well, he won't push me into doing something stupid."

"The guy in the cycle before that went for Dixon with a knife."

"Listen, sergeant, I'm no knife fighter. Just because a guy comes from a city and his folks ain't rich doesn't mean he's some kind of hood."

"I know that, lad. But Dixon doesn't, or won't admit it."

They stood in silence for a couple of minutes, and then the mess sergeant got up suddenly and said, "Get the hell out of here. Go on into town and have a beer or something. I'll be damned if I'll knuckle under to Dixon. But watch yourself kid. Don't let him push you into anything rash."

"Thanks sarge," Mosconi said, grabbing his jacket and drying his hands.

"That's okay. You go on into town or somewhere and relax. A man shouldn't have to take all this Basic Training crap without at least a little time to himself once in a while."

Mosconi rushed across to his barracks and peeled down for a shower. He dressed in his suntans and was adjusting his tie and combing his hair in the latrine when three other draftees came in.

"You going to town now?" one of them said.

"Yeh," Mosconi said, "I just got off K.P."

"There's nothing doing in that town anyway," the second one said. "You won't find any stompings or rumbles there Mosconi."

Mosconi whirled around and in one step was in front of the second

trainee and had him by the shirt front. "Listen sonny," he started, and then remembered himself and relaxed his grip. "Don't you start riding me like Dixon," he said.

"Yeh, sure, I'm sorry," the draftee said. "I didn't mean anything. I was just kidding."

"Not funny," Mosconi said. "Just because I come from a slum don't mean I'm a gangster and don't you forget it."

The three trainees stood back, afraid of him, and he finished knotting his tie and went out.

He was only a couple of years older than most of the other draftees, but they seemed to Mosconi like a bunch of little kids, incapable of understanding anything you told them or anything about the world. After the first few weeks he'd given up trying to talk to them much, except when he had to defend himself against Dixon's claims that he was some kind of a hoodlum or gangster. And even after he'd explained that a couple of dozen times the other trainees still seemed to picture him as a member of the Purple Dragons or something, armed to the teeth with guns, a knife in every pocket and brass knuckles on each hand, rumbling about the streets stomping old men and raping young girls.

He put on his cap and closed his locker and then headed for the orderly room. It was already almost dark, but the air was still pleasantly warm. It was a nice night to be heading into town on a pass, even if he'd have to be in before midnight.

P.F.C. Dunn was on duty in the orderly room when Mosconi came in. "Private Mosconi requesting permission to go into town on pass," Mosconi said, coming to ramrod stiff attention.

"Oh, hello theh Mosconi," Dunn said, tossing his comic book aside. "You headin' in fo' town t'night?"

"I am if you'll give me my pass," Mosconi said.

"Oh, yeh," Dunn said. He swivelled around in his chair and hunted through the pass file. "But you bettah not let ol' Copral Dixon see you go. Ol' Dixon's likely to want to skin you alive on genrul principles."

"What the hell did I do now?" Mosconi said.

"Oh, you didn't do nothin'. It's jes' that Dixon don't like you. You ought to know that by now."

"Yeh," Mosconi said. "Well, I'll see you."

"You bettah be in early, soljer," Dunn said. "T'morrow we goin' to run you young people through the infiltration course. You know what that is?"

"Yeh, I've heard. Live bullets and fake shell bursts and crawling."

"Live bullets jes' forty inches above the ground," Dunn chuckled. "Real cozy stuff, boy. Jes' like Korea without the gooks."

"Okay, I'll be in early," Mosconi said. He turned and went out of

the orderly room and headed for the gate.

Dunn is all right, he thought. Kind of a ridge-runner, but a nice guy. It isn't just that Dixon is a Southerner that makes him so mean. It must be his lantern jaw and that long, skinny body. Not enough meat on him, too much bile. Too hell with it, Mosconi thought. Two more weeks and I'm done with Basic and maybe I'll get sent to Field Radio Repair School. That was the tech school he had applied for. Learning to be a radio or television repairman had long been a dream of his, but he'd never scraped enough money together when he was a civilian to pay the tuition. Whatever he made on a job had to go to his father, who was a lush, or his mother, who was always sick.

He walked to the gate and stood in the authorized ride station waiting for a lift to town. He thought of how a beer would taste, and wondered if he would get a chance to talk to the waitress he had talked to the weekend before, and whether he might take a chance on asking if he could walk her home. After a few minutes a soldier in civies stopped and picked him up and he rode into town with the man, declining an invitation to join him in a beer.

Mosconi was a loner by nature. In his neighborhood at home he had always managed to stay out of a gang. The idea of banding together with a bunch of other guys to build up your courage had never appealed to him, and the army irritated him in almost the same way that the gangs had at home. So many people trying to look and act just like each other, dress alike and think alike. He walked around the town until he found a quiet bar off the main drag, where the local people went. He sat at the end of the bar sipping a glass of tap beer and making rings on the bar with the bottom of the glass and looking at himself in the mirror. Even after two months in the army it was hard to get used to the short-haired man staring back at him. With longer hair and his own clothes Mosconi had recognized himself, but now his chin, once strong, seemed weak, and his nose smaller and his eyes less dark. His ears seemed to stick out from the sides of his head.

After the second beer he felt restless and he left the bar to walk. He stuck to back streets, avoiding the places where soldiers would congregate, and walked down a residential street pretending that he was not a soldier himself, that he had a home of his own here and was walking home from downtown after a day of work. He discovered that pretending he was a civilian and forgetting the army was more refreshing even than a beer.

After a while he found himself in a light industrial section. Here the

warehouses and small manufacturing plants looked somehow army-like in their uniform drabness, and he was reminded of his own home neighborhood, though this section lacked the lighted windows and crowds of people of home. Still, the dark hopelessness of the buildings reminded him, and out of habit he found himself tense and careful.

He was looking for a way back to the residential district when his eye caught movement down an alley, and he stopped to look. Three men were feverishly unloading a truck and the rapidity with which they worked contrasted strangely with the quiet of the deserted street. They worked in the pool of light from a single unshaded bulb, carrying the contents of the truck in a door. Then Mosconi realized why they were in such a hurry—it was an army truck, and one of the three men was in army fatigues.

The man in the fatigue uniform turned toward the end of the alley where Mosconi stood, and he saw that it was Corporal Dixon.

They stood staring at each other for what could have been no longer than a couple of seconds, but seemed infinitely longer to Mosconi. It was Dixon all right, his lantern jaw and lean body and sour mouth, even at fifty feet Mosconi had no doubt about who it was.

Then Dixon's hand darted into his pocket and reappeared with a pistol, and Mosconi turned and ran down the dark street, and behind him he heard Dixon's boots crashing against the pavement in pursuit. Mosconi ran and listened for the sound of a shot or the whistle of a bullet.

To Mosconi the industrial area was like home—he knew almost by instinct which alley led somewhere and which was blind. He ran down streets and up alleys and the pursuing boots faded behind him, and finally he re-entered the residential district and crossed into a wooded park. He ran through the park past lovers on benches, who turned to look in surprise as he fled past, and finally he stopped, winded, and stood listening to see if he was still being followed. But he heard nothing so he sat on a bench and caught his breath.

So Dixon was heisting army supplies. Had the cadreman recognized him? He was only one of thousands of soldiers in the camp, and in his uniform with his cap over his forehead he would have been hard to recognize, yet there had been something in Dixon's face, an extra note of hate, that seemed to indicate that the corporal had recognized him.

He saw that he was in a real bind. The corporal, believing that Mosconi would turn him in, would hate him twice as much. If the damn fool only thought about it he might realize that Mosconi wasn't the ratting kind, but Dixon hated him too much to see that.

All right, then maybe he should turn him in. To protect himself. But Dixon was probably miles from the warehouse by now, and it would be his word against the corporal's. Dixon could get plenty of people to testify that there was bad blood between them, and make it look like a grudge beef. And anyway, ratting on a man went against the grain.

In any case his evening was ruined, and all Mosconi felt like doing was going back to the barracks and sleeping. There was a hard, sour knot in his stomach that even the girl who worked in the restaurant could not soften. Not that he was ashamed of running. He'd learned early on the streets of the city that sometimes all you could do was run. But the memory of it was still a sour taste in his mouth.

He walked back out to the highway and stood by the courtesy ride sign waiting for a ride. Once an army truck came up the road from town and he quickly turned his back and walked away. He did not have a chance to see if Dixon were driving it.

He got no ride, and when the bus came he hopped aboard and sat in the back, trying to relax. At the camp he walked quickly to the barracks and undressed and climbed into his bunk.

His sleep was uneasy, and when he awoke in the morning to Dixon's usual raucous obscenities he felt as if he'd had no sleep at all. Corporal Dixon walked down the barracks between the rows of bunks, and when he came to Mosconi's bunk he seemed to look more closely at him than at the other trainees. But Dixon always gave him the hard eye, always the chicken treatment, trying to catch him at something, and as usual he passed on without comment.

If Corporal Dixon was aware that it had been Mosconi who had seen him unloading the truck he did not show it. They cleaned up the barracks and fell in for chow, and Dixon said nothing. Then the company marched off to spend the morning at class, Articles of War, Nomenclature of the .30 Cal. Machine Gun, Squad Tactics and finally Map Reading, and though every time Mosconi looked around Dixon seemed to be right beside him, the lean corporal said nothing.

They marched back to the company area and ate a lunch of C rations and then packed their field packs for the march to the infiltration course. When they fell in again in the company square the company commander appeared in front of them. He was an R.O.T.C. lieutenant, young for a company commander, and very proud. He told them to stand at ease. Mosconi was in the middle of the front rank of the platoon, and Corporal Dixon stood two paces in front and three men to Mosconi's right.

"All right, men," the lieutenant said, "I have an important announcement to make. I have a report here from the Inspector General. A large quantity of government property has been stolen, and the I.G. wants anyone who has any information about it to report immediately."

It was so unexpected that Mosconi's head swiveled involuntarily toward Dixon, and he found that the corporal had turned toward him at the same instant. If there had been any doubt in Dixon's mind before about who had seen him there was none now, and the cadreman's eyes narrowed to black slits. The two men's glances locked for an instant, and then the corporal snapped his head front and Mosconi did the same, his stomach suddenly knotted again.

"You can report anything you know to me," the C.O. said, "Unless of course you think I've been doing the stealing, heh, heh, in which case you should report directly to the I.G." He hesitated for a moment as though waiting for someone to step out of ranks and say something, and then continued; "Well, that's all. Sergeant Ramirez, take the men out to the infiltration course."

On the field first sergeant's command the company pivoted and started out of the company area. Mosconi was now on the right hand side of the platoon, and he felt rather than saw Corporal Dixon just behind him and to one side, the cadreman's eyes boring into the back of his shoulder.

They marched out of the main camp and up a winding road into the hills to the north, and the sun was warm on their helmets and their packs were heavy. With a sudden clarity, between one step and the next, Mosconi knew that Dixon was going to kill him. The idea seemed enormous and sharp edged in his mind. Dixon would assume that he was going to tell the C.O. the first chance he got, and Dixon's only idea of how to stop him would be to try to kill him.

Oh hell, he thought, quit making up stories. If he does anything he'll try to scare you or offer to cut you in. But the feeling that he would try to kill him still remained. Dixon's more afraid than I am, he thought. It's just that I've been in this damn Basic Training and I've had people push me around so much it's taken all my guts. Having Dixon over me I get to thinking that he's twice life size. He's just a man, I've met tougher.

But have you? he thought. What will you do if he comes at you? Right up to the last minute he'll have the advantage of being your non-com. If you take a poke at him he'll have you, and nothing you say about him will be believed. And have you got the guts? It's been a long time since you had to fight off the gangs, and even then it didn't take any guts, you didn't

have any choice but to fight, you were always surrounded. Last night you ran. Have you got any guts any more, or are you soft?

They rounded a bend in the road and the infiltration course spread before them. It was about as long as a football field, and on the near end there was a trench, and on an embankment above it were four machine guns, the crews lazing beside their weapons. Scattered about the field were round pits like shell holes fenced with chicken wire, and the field was slashed by rows of barbed wire entanglements. At the far end of the field was another trench, just at the bottom of the hill, and behind the trench was a gentle upslope, shaved down to bare dirt.

They marched down beside the field to the far trench, and gathered there for an introductory lecture by the lieutenant in charge of the course. He told them that they were scheduled to crawl the length of the infiltration course three times, twice that afternoon and once after dark. The machine guns, he said, fired forty inches above the ground, live ammunition. The pits were electrically detonated explosive charges, made to resemble artillery shell explosions but harmless unless a man tried to climb inside over the chickenwire. He had one of the cadremen demonstrate how to crawl and how to get under the barbed wire and how to keep a rifle out of the dirt.

"All right, now remember," the lieutenant concluded, "That's live ammunition going over your heads, but if you keep down you're perfectly safe. Forty inches is nearly waist high to the average man. Start crawling when I tell you, and keep moving. Keep your rifle clean and the barrel out of the dust like you've been taught, and don't play games or screw around. We run a safe course here, but two men have died on it in the last two years."

The lecture finished he ordered Sergeant Ramirez to fall the company into the trench. They filed in and spread out, five to ten feet between men. Behind them was the hill, the shaved down area that the lieutenant had called the impact area, where the bullets from the four machine guns hit. In front of them, in the distance, they could see the machine guns themselves, and the rows of barbed wire and the explosive pits.

They stood and waited, as they had grown used to waiting in the army. Mosconi tried to relax. He thought about Corporal Dixon and wondered what he would do. This will be the place, Mosconi thought. All he has to do is find some way to shoot me and they'll think the machine guns got me.

Well, if he did it that way it would be clean and fast. He'd be out of the whole mess, the army and Dixon and Basic Training, and he'd never have to go home to his drunked-up father and his sick

mother and the filthy street. And if Dixon tried it and botched it, then he'd report the son of a bitch.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Dixon making his way down the trench. Mosconi kept his eyes forward. He wondered if the corporal would try to make a deal with him now. Then he felt Dixon behind him, staring into his back. The corporal stopped and stood still, and Mosconi could hear him breathing and feel the heat of his body. Then the cadreman passed on down the line, and in a minute the lieutenant ordered the company to advance, and they heard the hammering of the machine guns at the other end, and the whine of the bullets going overhead and the KA-THUNK as they impacted behind them.

Mosconi climbed up out of the trench, careful to keep his head and then his butt close to the ground. He felt naked under the machine guns. He began to crawl on knees and toes and elbows and belly toward the trench at the far end of the field, waiting for Dixon's bullet to hit him and wondering when it would come. His rifle kept slipping off the crook of his arm and muzzling into the dirt and he had to tug it back and crawl on. Then he was to the first barbed wire entanglement and he turned over on his back to heel himself under it, and in the distance he heard the first simulated shell burst. A few yards farther one exploded near him, but he was ready for it and he hardly stiffened. Once he raised his head far enough to look ahead and saw the machine gun nearest him swiveling from side to side, one man feeding in a belt of cartridges and another triggering the weapon. He crawled on, under wire and across open spaces.

Ahead of him he saw a man drop out of sight, and he wondered what had happened until he crawled another ten yards and found a trench in front of him and dropped in himself. Then he knew that he had finished the first crossing. He lay in the bottom of the trench and caught his breath, and then sat and waited for the stragglers to make it. Finally the machine guns stopped hammering overhead and the company marched out of the trench. Mosconi looked around, back across the field and then up at the clean blue sky, and wondered why Dixon hadn't done it. And then he realized that the third crossing was to be after dark, and if Dixon had anything planned he would plan it for then.

They relaxed in a field for half an hour and then the lieutenant ordered them back into the trench and told them to do it for speed. They waited again and when the order came Mosconi climbed out of the trench like an old pro and crawled down the field, and this time it was a snap, except for the rawness of his knees and elbows from the first crossing. Before he

realized that he was well begun the final trench was ahead and he dropped into it.

They brought supper out to the company in field kitchens, and the men scattered around the field to eat and relax and wait for the sun to set so they could make their night run of the course. Mosconi sat by himself. He knew that it would be wise to sit with a group, and even wanted to, but he had been a loner since he was a boy on the streets and he could not break himself of it. He sat and thought about how Dixon might try to kill him, and wondered if the corporal would really try it or whether it was only his imagination. For the first time he thought with nostalgia of his father and his mother and the streets of home. You're chicken, he taunted himself, and he had no ready answer. He ate his supper and sat leaning against his pack, smoking and waiting.

Then the company began to form up by the end of the entry trench, and the light was dimming away rapidly. Mosconi started down toward the men. You're chicken, he thought. If you weren't you'd go find Dixon and have it out.

Dixon was by the platoon when Mosconi came up.

"C'mere, city boy," the cadreman said.

Mosconi walked toward him.

"You get right up to the head of the line," Dixon said. "I want to be sure you don't bug out or something. I want to keep my eye on you, boy."

"All right, Corporal Dixon," Mosconi said.

"I got an idea a tough city punk like you is likely to bug out when the bullets start a'flying, and I want to see you crawl like the rest."

"I went through with everybody else this afternoon," Mosconi said.

"Did you now? Well, after dark it's rougher, punk, and I want to be sure."

The platoon formed up and led the way into the trench, and Mosconi led the platoon, so that he was at the far end of the field, the first man in the trench. Dixon spread the men out and in the growing darkness Mosconi could not even see the man nearest him. He was the end man, a perfect target for Dixon.

Down the line he heard talk and saw cigarettes glow, and then Corporal Dixon appeared beside him out of the darkness. "Come with me, city boy," the cadreman said. "The lieutenant wants us to go check and see there ain't any stray dogs or cows or people out back."

Dixon vaulted out of the trench toward the impact area, and Mosconi stood still in the trench. "Find somebody else," he said.

Dixon looked down at him. "Get your tail up here or I'll have you for insubordination, soljer," he said.

It was a trap of some kind, but the corporal had him. If he didn't

go along he'd be in the stockade by morning, and anything he said about Dixon would be pure malice. Mosconi climbed up out of the trench and followed the corporal. Maybe he wants to get me off alone and ask me to forget what I saw, Mosconi thought. What should I say if he does?

They climbed up the impact area slope and then across a ways, and suddenly Dixon stopped and turned, and Mosconi almost bumped into him in the dark.

"About you seeing me unloading that truck last night . . ." Dixon started, his voice deceptively soft.

It was only by luck that Mosconi saw the rifle butt swinging toward his head in time. He dropped to the ground and rolled away and to his feet, and Dixon's rifle found only air. The corporal cursed softly and came after him, catching him with a boot in the thigh.

Suddenly Mosconi was angrier than he had ever been, angrier than any street gang of petty hoods had ever made him. He swung his rifle like a baseball bat at the dim figure of the cadreman. But as he did so he saw Dixon's rifle butt lash out at him again, and this time he had no chance to duck. He felt his own rifle strike home, and then the crash of Dixon's rifle against his cheek, and then he felt nothing.

He was lying somewhere, and it was dark, and there were specks of angry red racing through it and his head hurt. His cheek was against the ground and tiny sharp-edged bits of metal were grinding into it and into his side.

Then there was a powerful KA-THUNK to the right of his head, and a split-second later another KA-THUNK to his left, and then more, fading away to his left, and in an instant he knew that he was lying on the slope of the impact area. He did not even try to get to his feet but rolled down the slope, and the jagged fragments of old bullets scratched him as he rolled over them. When his face was away from the slope he saw out across the infiltration course. Streams of tracer bullets sprayed from the four machine guns, and one stream seemed to be coming straight at him.

Then he felt nothing. I've been hit, he thought. That bastard Dixon. But his body hit the ground again, and he knew that he was in the bottom of the trench, safe. He lay there and caught his breath, and by the light of a mock shell burst he saw the legs of the last man leaving the trench. He gathered himself together and climbed to his feet and up out of the trench, and just as he was clearing it he felt a tug at his pants leg.

He turned to find himself face to face with Sergeant Ramirez.

"Where the hell's Corporal Dixon?" Ramirez said.

"I don't know," Mosconi said. "I haven't seen him." Then he

crawled away, down the course.

He didn't get me, he thought, and wait till he sees me. Behind him he could hear Ramirez shouting for Dixon. He'll think he's seeing a ghost.

And it was not until he had reached the first line of wires, and Ramirez's voice had begun to fade behind him, that Mosconi remembered his own angry rifle swing, and the feeling of it connecting, and realized that Dixon must still be lying in the impact area somewhere, catching bullets he had meant for Mosconi.

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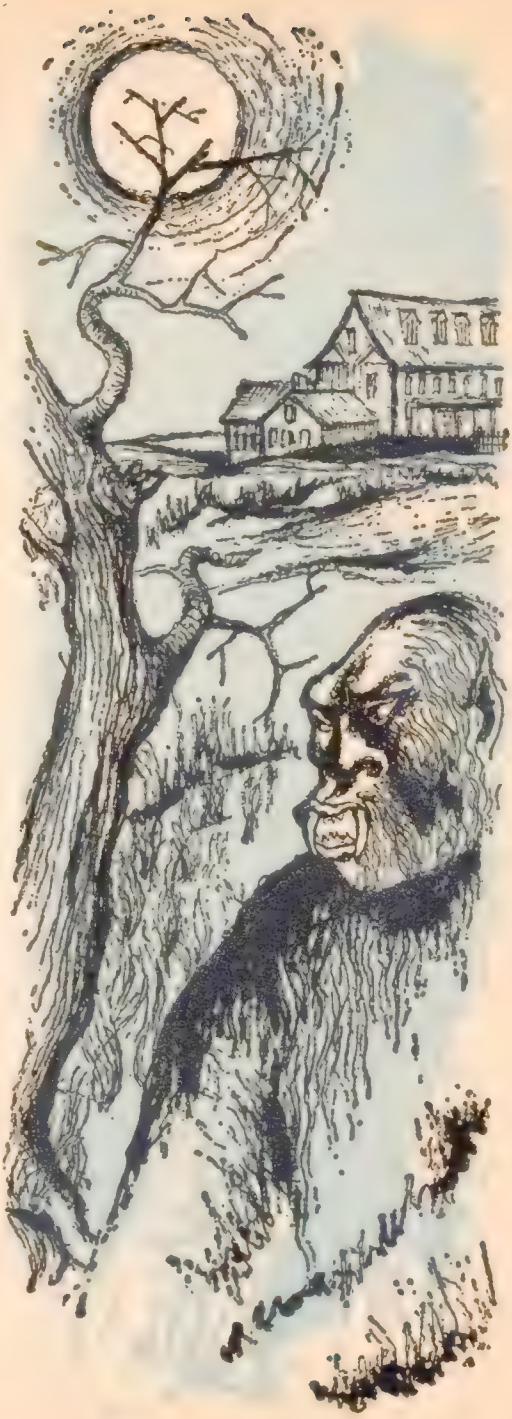
The monster had been with the Deveraux family for generations, a proud tradition, an heirloom so to speak . . . but then it began killing people.

THE DEVERAUX MONSTER

BY
JACK
RITCHIE



HAVE *you* ever seen the monster?" my fiancée, Diana Munson asked.

"No," I said. But I had. A number of times. I smiled. "However everyone seems to agree that the Deveraux monster rather resembles the Abominable Snowman, but with a coloring more suitable to a temperate climate. Dark brown or black, I believe."

"I wouldn't take this at all lightly, Gerald," Diana said. "After all, my father *did* see your family beast last night."

"Actually it was dusk," Colonel Munson said. "I'd just completed a

stroll and was about to turn into the gate when I looked back. The fog was about, nevertheless I clearly saw the creature at a distance of approximately sixty feet. It glared at me and I immediately rushed toward the house for my shotgun."

Freddie Hawkins summoned the energy to look attentive. "You took a shot at it?"

Colonel Munson flushed. "No. I slipped and fell. Knocked myself unconscious." He glared at us. "I did not faint. I definitely did not faint."

"Of course not, sir," I said.

Colonel Munson, recently retired, and his daughter Diana came to our district some eight months ago and purchased a house at the edge of the village.

Fresh from Sandhurst and bursting for a good show, he joined his regiment on November 12, 1918, and that initiated a remarkably consistent career. In the Second World War he sat in England during Monty's North African campaigns. When he finally wrangled a transfer to that continent, he arrived three days after Rommel's command disintegrated. He fretted under the African sun during the invasion of Europe and when at last he breathlessly reached France, the fighting had moved to Belgium. He still fumed at a training depot near Cannes when our forces joined the Russians in Germany. In the 1950's he set foot in Korea just as the cease fire was announced and during the Suez incident he was firmly stationed at Gibraltar. It is rumored that his last regiment's junior officers—in secret assembly—formally nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Freddie sighed. "All I have at my place is a ghostly cavalier who scoots about shouting for his sword and cursing Cromwell. Rather common, don't you think? Haven't seen him myself yet, but I'm still hoping."

Diana frowned in thought. "Who else, besides Father, has seen the Deveraux monster recently?"

"Norm Wakins did a few nights ago," Freddie said.

I smiled. "Ah."

Freddie nodded. "I know. Norm hasn't gone to bed sober since he discovered alcohol. However he has always managed to walk home under his own power. As a matter of fact on Friday evening he was quite capable of running. Norm left the village at his usual time—when his favorite pub closed—and his journey was routine until just north of the Worly Cairn when 'something made me look up.' And there he saw it—crouching and glaring down at him from one of those huge boulders strewn about. His description of the animal is a bit vague—he did not linger in the area long—but from what I was able to piece together, it was somewhat apelike, with dangling arms, a hideous face, and glowing yellow eyes. He claims that it was fanged

and that it howled as it pursued him to his very cottage door."

"I shall have to carry a revolver loaded with silver bullets," I murmured.

"Only effective against werewolves." Freddie stretched lazily. "During the last ninety years the monster has been seen dozens of times."

Diana turned to me. "Gerald, just how did your family *acquire* this monster?"

"There are dark rumors. But I assure you, there is *no* Deveraux monster."

Freddie scratched an ear. "Gerald's grandfather had a brother. Leslie. Well, Leslie was always a bit wild and just before he disappeared. . . ."

"He went to India," I said. "And eventually died there."

". . . just before he *disappeared,* Leslie seemed to grow a bit *hairy.*"

I remembered a few paragraphs of the letter my grandfather had left to his son—a letter which had been passed on to me by my father.

> I first became aware of what was happening when I accidentally came across Leslie at the Red Boar. It is not my usual pub—when I do go to pubs—but I was in the vicinity after seeing my tailor and thirsty for a pint.
>
> When I entered, I recognized my brother's back at the bar. I also noticed that the other patrons seemed to shy away from him and that the barmaid, in fact, appeared rather pale.
>
> When Leslie turned at my approach, I stopped in shock. His eyebrows had grown thick and shaggy, his hairline was almost down to his eyes, and his complexion had turned a dark brown. He leered when he saw me, revealing stained yellow teeth.
>
> I had seen him less than two hours before, but now I scarcely knew him!

"According to legend," Freddie continued. "Gerald's great uncle never did go to Africa, or India, or some beastly place like that. His brother was finally forced to keep him confined. In the east room on the third floor, wasn't it, Gerald?"

"Someplace about the house," I said. "Though if you have a monster, I should think that a more logical place to keep him might be in one of the cellars."

"Too damp," Freddie said. "And you must remember that your grandfather was rather fond of his brother—monster or not.

Diana's eyes widened. "You don't mean that. . . ?"

"Oh, yes," Freddie said. "Leslie is supposed to have turned into the Deveraux monster."

"How ghastly," Diana said dutifully. "But *why?*"

Freddie shrugged. "Heredity, possibly. The monster eventually escaped. Bit through his chains, I

believe. The Deverauxs always had good teeth." He looked at me. "Either that or he was let out periodically for a constitutional?"

"My grandfather would never release a monster," I said firmly. "Matter of honor."

Freddie calculated. "If this monster is human . . . I mean solidly animal, then it would be about ninety years old—considering Leslie's age at the time of his metamorphosis. Rather decrepit by now, I should think. Did you happen to notice its condition, Colonel?"

Colonel Munson glowered at the floor. "Seemed spry enough to me."

"I know that people have *seen* the monster," Diana said. "But is it dangerous?"

Freddie smiled faintly. "Eighty-five years ago a Sam Garvis was found dead on the moors. He was frightfully mangled."

"Packs of wild dogs roamed this area in those days," I said. "Garvis was unfortunate enough to meet one of them."

"Possibly. But fifteen years later your grandfather was found dead at the base of a cliff."

"He fell," I said. "Broke his neck."

"Probably he fell because he was being pursued by the monster," Freddie said. "It had been seen just before he died. And then there was your father. Died of fright practically at his front door."

"I did not *faint*," Colonel Munson muttered.

"Father did not die of fright," I said. "Weak heart plus too much exercise." I glanced at my watch and rose. "I'll have to be running along, Diana."

Freddie got up too. "Mother's expecting me. Besides, Gerald needs an escort across the moors. Someone fearless."

The colonel saw us to the door. He was a short, broad-shouldered man with a military mustache in gray prime. "I'm going to hunt the beast."

"Best of luck," I said.

"I'll need it," he said morosely. "Hunted tigers in Malaya, leopard in Kenya, grizzly in Canada. Never got a blasted one."

Freddie and I said our goodbyes, adjusted our collars against the late afternoon's chilly mist, and began walking.

"I rather envy you," Freddie said.

"I'm perfectly willing to give you the monster."

"I mean Diana."

"Quite different."

Freddie brooded. "Of course I can't court her now. You do have some kind of a definite arrangement, don't you?"

"We're getting married in June."

He sighed. "My only hope is that the monster might slaughter you before then."

"No assists, please."

"Wouldn't think of it. After all, we've known each other since time began, so to speak. Served in the same regiment. I saved your life."

"Barely."

"I'm fumble-fingers with bandages and the like. Besides, I couldn't remember where the pressure points were supposed to be."

We walked silently for a while and then he said, "You don't really believe there is a monster, do you?"

"Of course not."

We parted at the branch in the path and I went on toward Stonecroft.

I made my way among the lichen-covered boulders and paused for a moment at the remains of the huts. They were low roofless circles of stones now, but once they had been the dwellings of a forgotten, un-written race. Perhaps they were men erect, but I have always had a feeling that they might have been shaggy and that they crawled and scuttled by preference.

I wondered again what had happened to them. Were they all really dead and dust or did their blood linger in our veins?

The moor wind died and I glanced up at a faint rustle. A dark figure moved slowly toward me in the swirling wisps of fog.

When it was within twenty feet of me, I recognized Verdie Tibbs.

Verdie is simple. Actually quite simple and he likes to roam the moors.

I thought he seemed a little disappointed when he saw me, but he smiled as I said, "Hello, Verdie."

"I thought it was my friend," Verdie said.

"Your friend?"

Verdie frowned. "But he always runs away."

"Who does?"

Verdie smiled again. "He has fur."

"Who has fur?"

"My friend. But he always runs away." Verdie shook his head and wandered back into the dusk.

I reached Stonecroft ten minutes later. No one seems to know just how old my home is. It had begun existence as a modest stone building in a distant time, but generations of Deverauxs had added to it—the last substantial addition being in 1720. My contribution has been the installation of plumbing, electricity, and the telephone. At the present time I occupy only the central portion of the three story structure and very little of that.

When I reached the studded front door, I heard the great key in the lock and the bolt being drawn. The massive door opened.

"Well, Jarman," I said. "Taken to locking the doors?"

He smiled faintly. "It's my wife who insists, sir. She feels that it would be wiser at the present time."

"I've never heard that the monster enters buildings."

"There's always a first time, sir."

Jarman, his wife, and their twenty-year-old son Albert, are my only servants at present. I could perhaps do without Albert, but it is family history that the Deverauxs and the

Jarmans stepped over the threshold of Stonecroft at approximately the same moment. Turning out a Jarman would be equivalent to removing one of the cornerstones or snatching away the foundation of Stonecroft.

At late breakfast the next morning, I noticed that Jarman seemed worried and preoccupied. When he brought the coffee, I said, "Is there something troubling you, Jarman?"

He nodded. "It's Albert, sir. Yesterday evening he went to the village. He wasn't back by ten-thirty, but my wife and I thought nothing of it and retired. This morning we found that he hadn't slept in his bed."

"Probably spent the night with one of his friends."

"Yes, sir. But he should at least have phoned."

Freddie Hawkins wandered in from the garden and took a seat at the table. "Thought I'd drop over and see if you're tired." He helped himself to bacon. "Sleep well last night?"

"Like a top."

"No sleep walking?"

"Never in my life."

"You look a bit hairy, Gerald."

"I need a haircut and I haven't shaved yet. Bachelor's privilege."

"Do you mind if I examine the bottoms of your shoes?"

"Too personal. Besides, if I roamed the moors last night as the monster, I wouldn't have worn shoes."

"There is the possibility that you are a monster only from the ankles up, Gerald." He took some scrambled eggs. "I suppose you'll be dropping in at the Munsons?"

"Of course."

"Mind if I toddle along?"

"You're frightfully infatuated, aren't you?"

"Fatally. We male Hawkinses are invariably lanky, tired, and muddle-headed, but we are always attracted to the brisk practical woman. The moment I saw Diana and learned that she had once taken a course in accounting, I experienced an immense electrical reaction. You couldn't step out of the picture, could you, Gerald? For an old comrade-in-arms?"

"Not the thing to do."

"Of course," he said glumly. "Not gentlemanly. It's the woman's prerogative to break up things like this." He seemed to have something else on his mind and after a while he spoke again. "Gerald, last night Diana saw the monster."

I frowned. "How do *you* know?"

"She phoned my mother," Freddie said. "They get along rather well." He put down his coffee cup. "Just after she retired, Diana thought she heard a noise outside. She went to the window and there in the moonlit garden she saw the monster. By the time she roused the colonel and he found his shotgun, the creature had scampered away."

I lit a cigar and took several thoughtful puffs.

Freddie watched me. "I don't know what to make of it either."

After I shaved we walked to the Munson house.

Diana met us at the door. "Gerald, I'd like to talk to you alone for a few moments, please."

Freddie waved a languid goodbye. "I'll go on to the village. The Red Boar, if anyone needs me desperately."

When we were alone, Diana turned to me. "Really, Gerald, I cannot accept a monster."

"But Freddie is really very. . . ."

"I mean the Deveraux monster."

"Diana, if the animal exists, I believe that it is actually benign."

"Benign, my foot! That thing is dangerous."

"Even if it is, Diana, it seems that only the male Deverauxs have anything to fear."

"Gerald, I am looking at this from the practical point of view. I simply cannot have you murdered after our marriage, especially if we have children. Do you realize that the death duties these days would force me to sell Stonecroft? I might even have to go to London to find some employment. And I do not believe in working mothers."

"But, Diana. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Gerald, but I've been thinking this whole thing over. Especially since last night. I'm afraid I'll have to call off our engagement."

"Diana," I said—and winced. "Is there . . . is there someone else?"

She thought for a moment. "I'll be frank with you, Gerald. I've been examining Freddie. He does seem to need management. I've met his mother and we seem to have a lot in common."

"Freddie has his ghost too," I pointed out. "That cavalier who runs about looking for his horse."

"His sword. But he is entirely harmless. He's tramped about the grounds since 1643 and has never yet harmed anyone."

"Suppose he finds his sword?"

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it."

I went to the window. "That cursed monster."

"It's your own fault," Diana said. "You Deverauxs should have watched your genetics and things like that."

I left her for the village and stopped at the Red Boar. Freddie was rather pale. "I just heard," he said. "Jarman's son, Albert, was found dead on the moor a half an hour ago. Head bashed in. Quite a messy business."

"Good Lord! Who did it?"

"No one knows yet, Gerald. But I'm afraid that people are talking about the Deveraux monster." He smiled faintly. "Gerald, I'm afraid that I've given you a rather hard time about that. I just want to say that I really believe that you only need a haircut and that's all."

I returned immediately to Stonecroft, but the Jarmans had evidently gone on to the village.

I went upstairs to the east room and unlocked the chest. I removed the envelope and re-read my grandfather's letter.

> . . . I believe that the expression on my face gave Leslie considerable pleasure. I pulled myself together and was about to ask for some explanation, but Leslie took my arm and led me outside. "Later," he said.
>
> We mounted our horses and rode out of the village. After half a mile, Leslie pulled up and dismounted. He removed his hat and then I watched a transformation. He pulled at his forehead and the coarse hair forming his low hairline came away in his fingers. His bushy eyebrows disappeared in the same manner. "And, my dear brother," he said, "My complexion can be washed away and a good tooth brushing will remove the stain from my teeth."
>
> "Leslie," I demanded sternly. "What is the meaning of this?"
>
> He grinned. "I'm creating a monster. The Deveraux monster."
>
> He put his hand on my shoulder. "Bradley, we Deverauxs have been here since the dawn of history. We were here before the Norman invasion. Deveraux is not French, it is simply a corruption of some pre-historic grunts applied to one of our ancestors. And yet, Bradley, do you realize that we are not *haunted* by anything or anyone?"
>
> He waved an arm at the horizon. "The Hawkins family has its blasted cavalier. The Trentons have their weeping maid waiting for Johnny to come home from the fair, or some such thing. And even the Burleys, *nou-veau riche,* have their bally butler drifting through the house looking for the fish forks. But what do we have? I'll tell you. *Nothing.*"
>
> "But, Leslie," I said. "These are *authentic* apparitions."
>
> "Authentic, my Aunt Marcy! They were all *invented* by someone with imagination to add to the midnight charm of the homeplace. People are not really repelled by ghosts. They *want* them. And so when they do not tell outright lies about seeing them, they eventually *convince* themselves that they have.
>
> "Bradley," Leslie continued. "I am *creating* a Deveraux monster. And what better way than this? The villagers actually *see* me gradually turning into an apelike creature. And in a week or so, I, the human Leslie Deveraux, will disappear."
>
> I blinked. "Disappear?"
>
> "Bradley, I'm the younger son. I cannot possibly remain at Stonecroft the rest of my life waiting for your demise. You seem remarkably healthy. I suppose I could poison you, but I'm really fond of you. Therefore the only

course left is for me to go abroad to seek fame, fortune, and all that rot. But before I go—as a parting present, so to speak—I am leaving you the Deveraux monster. I will be seen wandering the moors—in full costume—and pursuing a passerby here and there. I have had a complete suit constructed, Bradley. It is locked in a chest in the east room and I will don it for my midnight forays."

I immediately and vigorously launched into arguement condemning his scheme as absolutely ridiculous and insane, and, at the time, I thought that I succeeded in convincing him to give up the entire thing. But I should have known Leslie and that half-smile when he finally nodded in agreement.

He wandered the moors in his Deveraux monster suit the next week—though I did not learn about it until later. It seems that people were reluctant to bring the creature's existence to my attention, since there was a general feeling that Leslie was undergoing a transformation.

And then Leslie disappeared.

It was not until a year later that Leslie wrote me from India, but in the meantime I had no answer to those of our friends who cautiously inquired about his disappearance. In a fit of pique one day, I declared that actually I kept Leslie chained in the east room. It was an unfortunate remark and my words were eagerly taken at face value by a number of people who should have known better.

I might have exposed the Deveraux myth when Leslie's letter finally came, if, in the meantime, this district had not enacted the mantrap laws.

I have never scattered mantraps about my grounds. I feel that their jaws are quite capable of severing a poacher's leg. But I have nourished the *impression* in the countryside and at the village that I was quite liberal in strewing them about my property. That was quite sufficient to keep most of the poachers off my land.

But then, as I mentioned, the mantraps were outlawed, and if I have a reputation for anything, it is obeying the law and the poachers know that. They immediately descended upon me with their snares and traps, causing untold depredations to the American quail and partridge I had introduced on the moor.

I tried everything to stop them, of course. I appealed to the authorities, I hired a gamekeeper, and I even personally threatened to thrash any poacher I apprehended on my property.

But nothing availed.

It was in a moment of total desperation that a wild idea descended upon me. I gathered up the

house keys and went up to the east room. I opened the chest Leslie had left behind and the Deveraux monster costume was inside.

It fit me perfectly.

I believe I have never since enjoyed myself as much as I did in the next few weeks. At night I would don the costume and wander about. I tell you, my son, it was with the most delicious pleasure that I pursued—with blood-chilling howls—the elder Garvis to the very door of his cottage.

The elder Garvis did not poach again—to my knowledge—but it is unfortunate that his experience, or his relation of that experience, did not make an impression upon his son. He persisted in poaching and eventually toppled off a cliff and broke his neck.

It is widely believed that his demise occurred while the monster pursued him. That is not true. I never met Sam, Jr. on the moors. But I have done nothing to discourage the legend. As a matter of fact, the monster has been "seen" a number of times when I did not leave the house.

And so, my son, when I depart, I leave you the Deveraux monster. Perhaps you too will find some use for him.

Your loving father,
Bradley Deveraux

My own father had added a note.

Gerald, it is remarkable how persistent the Garvis family is. Each Garvis, apparently, must learn about the monster from first hand experience before he refrains from poaching.

I pulled the costume from the chest and slipped into it. At the mirror I gazed at the monster once again.

Yes, he was indeed frightening, and the good colonel *had* fainted.

Norm Wakins had seen the Deveraux monster, and simple Verdie Tibbs, and Diana.

But Albert Jarman? No.

After I let Diana catch a glimpse of me, I had returned directly home. I had met no one on the way and I had gone directly to bed. And slept soundly. Except for the dream.

I removed the head of my costume and stared at my reflection. Did I need a shave again?

At dusk I saw the Jarmans returning to Stonecroft and let them in the front door.

Mrs. Jarman was a spare woman with dark eyes and she stared at me as though she was thinking something she didn't want to believe.

"Mrs. Jarman," I said. "I'd like to extend my most sincere. . . ."

She walked by me and disappeared into the back hall.

Jarman frowned. "Mrs. Jarman is very upset, sir. We all are."

"Of course."

Jarman was about to pass me, but

I stopped him. "Jarman, do the authorities have any idea who might have killed your son?"

"No, sir."

"Is there any . . . any talk?"

"Yes, sir," Jarman said. "There is talk about the Deveraux monster." He sighed. "Excuse me, sir. I should go to my wife."

Before turning in for the night, I opened the bedroom windows for air. The rolling hills of the moor were bright with the moon and in the distance a dog howled. I felt the drift of the cool wind.

A movement in the shadows below caught my eye. I watched the spot until I made out a crouching figure. It moved again and stepped into the light.

It was Verdie Tibbs. He glanced back at the house for a moment and then disappeared into the darkness.

That night I dreamed again. I dreamed that I left the house and roamed across the moors until I found the circle of stones. I remained there waiting. For anyone.

Albert Jarman's funeral took place on Thursday and I, of course, attended. It was a dark day and at the graveside the mist turned to light rain. Most of the countryside seemed to be in attendance and I was conscious that a great many of the eyes found me with a covert glance.

Freddie Hawkins came to Stonecroft the next morning while Jarman and I were going over the household accounts.

He sat down. "Frank Garvis was found dead in his garden this morning. Strangled. He had several tufts of hair . . . or fur . . . clutched in his fingers. Definitely not human, according to the inspector."

Jarman looked up, but said nothing.

I rubbed my neck. "Freddie, just what do *you* make of all this?"

"I don't know. Perhaps some ape has escaped from a circus or something of the sort?"

"The papers would have carried a notice."

He shrugged. "Could there actually *be* a Deveraux monster?" He looked at Jarman. "What do you think?"

"I have no opinion, sir."

Freddie grinned. "Perhaps Gerald rises in the middle of the night, gripped by some mysterious force, and goes loping about the moors searching for a victim." He shook his head. "But I guess that's out too. I hardly think that he would grow fur just for the occasion. Or does he slip into a monkey suit of some kind?"

Freddie looked at me for a few moments and then changed the subject. "My mother told me about your break with Diana. Dreadful sorry, Gerald."

"I think she rather fancies you," I said.

He flushed. "Really?"

"No doubt. She's impressed by your intelligence and drive."

He smiled. "No need to get nasty."

After he left, I went upstairs to the east room and unlocked the chest. I pulled out the Deveraux monster. Tufts of hair had been torn from both of the arms.

That evening I was in my study with a half empty bottle of whiskey when Jarman entered.

"Will that be all for today, sir?" he asked.

"Yes."

He glanced at the bottle and then turned to go.

"Jarman."

"Yes, sir."

"How is Mrs. Jarman?"

"She is . . . adjusting, sir."

I wanted to pour another glass, but not while Jarman was watching. "Do the authorities still have no suspects for your son's murder?"

"No, sir. No suspects."

"Do *you* have any . . . ideas?"

His eyes flickered. "No, sir."

I decided to pour the glass. "Does your *wife* have any ideas? Does she think that the Deveraux . . . ?" I found myself unable to go on.

I drank the whiskey and my next words came suddenly and were undoubtedly inspired by the drink. "Jarman, I want you to lock me in my bedroom tonight."

"Sir?"

"Lock me in my bedroom," I snapped.

He studied me and there was worry in his eyes.

I took a deep breath and came to a decision. "Jarman, follow me. I have something to show you."

I led him to the east room, unlocked the chest, and put the envelope in his hands. "Read this."

I waited impatiently until he finished and looked up.

"You see," I said. "There is *no* actual Deveraux monster."

"No, sir."

"Jarman, I wouldn't tell you what I am now going to if it weren't for the present circumstances. I must have your word of honor that you will not repeat my words to a soul. To no one at all, do you understand?"

"You have my word, sir."

I paced the room. "First of all, you know that the poachers have been plaguing us again?"

He nodded.

"Well, Jarman, I have been wearing the Deveraux monster. I am the one responsible for chasing Norm Wakins to his door. I am the one who met poor simple Verdie. Accidentally, I assure you. He is not a poacher. He actually tried to make friends with me and I was forced to flee." I stopped pacing. "My only intention was to frighten away poachers."

Jarman smiled faintly. "Is Colonel Munson a poacher?"

I felt myself flushing. "That was a spur of the moment thing. A lark."

He raised an eyebrow ever so slightly. "A lark, sir?"

I decided that I might as well be embarassingly candid. "Jarman, you are aware that the colonel and Diana Munson came here about eight months ago? And that within two months I found myself engaged?"

"Yes, sir. Rather sudden."

I agreed and cleared my throat. "I was committed and I am a gentleman. A man of my word, but still. . . ."

The corners of Jarman's mouth turned slightly. "You found yourself not quite as happy as you thought you should be?"

I flushed again. "I happened to see Colonel Munson while I was in the monster suit and suddenly it occurred to me that if the colonel, and perhaps Diana herself, should see the monster, they might not be so eager for me to. . . ." I wished that I were downstairs with the bottle.

"I understand, sir," Jarman said. "And I am sure that Miss Munson will be quite satisfied with Mr. Hawkins."

"Jarman," I said. "I have frightened a number of people, but I have injured no one. I am . . . positive . . . that I did not kill your son." I stared down at the Deveraux monster in the chest and at the bare spots on the arms.

Jarman's voice was quiet. "Do you still want to be locked up for the night, sir?"

There was silence in the room and when I looked up, I saw that he was watching me.

Finally Jarman said, "I *know* you didn't kill Albert."

"You *know?*"

"Yes, sir. Two nights ago Verdie Tibbs came to the back door and spoke to me. He saw Albert killed. He saw the murder from a distance, too far away to give aid to Albert . . . and the crime was over in an instant."

Jarman looked tired. "Albert was returning from the village and apparently he came across a set of poacher's snares or nets. According to Verdie, Albert was bending over them and he seemed to be tearing them apart, when suddenly someone leaped behind him and struck him with a rock."

"Who was it?" I demanded.

Jarman closed his eyes for a moment. "Frank Garvis, sir."

"But why didn't Verdie go to the authorities?"

"Verdie was afraid, sir. He's heard talk that he might be sent to an institution and he wants nothing to do with any public officials. But even if he had gone to the authorities, what good would that have done, sir? It would have been the word of simple Verdie against that of Frank Garvis."

"But then *who* killed Garvis last night?" I looked down at the chest again and wondered if I had only been dreaming when. . . .

"Sir," Jarman said quietly. "The Jarmans and the Deverauxs have been together ever since the beginning. There are no secrets a Dever-

aux can keep from a Jarman—not for long." He smiled faintly. "My grandfather also left a letter to his son, and, in turn, to me."

He took a key out of his vest pocket. "This unlocks the chest too, sir, and the Deveraux monster fits me—as it did my grandfather and my father whenever they wished to wear it."

Jarman sighed. "I would have preferred to remain silent on the whole matter and let it pass. But I could see that you were beginning to fear that you were responsible and so I had to speak. Now that you know, I will put my affairs in order and then go to the police with a full confession."

"What have you told your wife?"

"Nothing but that Garvis killed Albert. I did not want her to think what the villagers are thinking."

I rubbed my neck. "Jarman, I fail to see that any . . . good . . . can come of your going to the police."

"Sir?"

"The Deveraux monster murdered Garvis," I said. "I think that it is much, much better if we leave it that way."

After a while, Jarman spoke faintly. "Thank you, sir."

I pulled the Deveraux monster out of the chest. "However I believe that we should destroy this, don't you, Jarman? After all, someone might manage to compare it with the tufts of hair Garvis had in his fingers."

Jarman put the monster over his arm. "Yes, sir. I'll burn it." At the door he looked back. "Is the Deveraux monster dead, sir?"

A sudden gust of moor wind whispered around the shutters.

"Yes," I said. "The Deveraux monster is dead."

When he was gone, I happened to glance at the mirror.

Strange. I rather needed a shave again.

A Novel

BY LANCASTER SALEM

"We have a job to do immediately." Colonel Bello looked lingeringly around the auditorium, his eyes large and heavy-lidded. His voice was soft, barely audible. "And that job is to clean up this God-damned disgrace you call an army air field."

He leaned forward, watching the cab pull off Highway 84 into his driveway. Two men in khaki uniform climbed out. Silver bars and pilot wings gleamed in the dusk.

"Well," Victor Jennings said to the window. "The fruit salad boys. What do they want with me?"

He watched them coming up the flagstone walk. Like twins, except that one smiled, the other didn't. The combat veterans, brought back to Arizona to teach the tyros. Well, to teach Vic Jennings to fly you'd have to get him into the air. And you'd play hell trying. A man who never doubted how much courage he had. None.

He opened the door.

"Gentlemen, hush!" he said. "Roy Carlton and Frank Blackford. Welcome."

"Lieutenant Jennings," the taller pilot said, "Frankly, we need a favor. We hoped you'd help us. If it's an imposition . . ."

"Come in," Vic said. "Come in."

The two men came in, caps in their hands.

"What help do you want, Roy?" Vic said.

Roy smiled, small even teeth white against the tan. "Lieutenant—"

"Vic," Vic said.

"Vic," Roy said. "Tomorrow night another cadet class is graduating. We're supposed to get the liquor. And the Colonel says to get it in Nogales. Don't ask me why we can't get it in Tucson or Phoenix. I don't know why. Anyhow, we want to go down and pick it up tonight—and we don't have a car."

"You want my car?" Vic said.

The other pilot, Frank, shorter and darker than Roy, said, "Why don't you come with us? It's a nice ride, and we've got gas stamps."

Vic hesitated. "Well, I thought I might surprise someone in town. But why not? Be something different."

"Sure," Frank said, "the desert air is cool at night. Sixty-seventy miles; we'll be back about one."

Roy laughed. "You're personnel officer, Vic; morale of the men is part of your job. Seriously, if we had a car, we wouldn't ask."

"All right," Vic said. "Let's go."

Vic backed the car from the garage. The two pilots climbed in, Frank in the middle.

Roy laughed. "Vic, why the hell does a bachelor buy a coupe? You don't have room to tumble a cat in that midget back seat."

"Who needs a back seat," Vic said, "with all that Arizona desert?"

They drove in silence through the sparse traffic of Tucson, on to highway 89, past the Mission Road and through the villages of Sahuarita and Continental.

"No," Roy said. "Too gritty."

"What?" Frank said.

"Take a girl in the sand," Roy said. "No grace. No finesse. And no springs. She wouldn't do it."

"Who wouldn't do it?" Vic said.

"The dream girl of Hoffman Air Base. The Colonel's wife. The quiet, luscious, exciting Sandra Sloane. Can you see Sandra in the sand?"

"No," Vic said. "But, gentlemen all, I got to admit I'd like to."

Frank grunted and switched on the dash radio.

. . . . 1370 on your dial, Station KTUC brings you the latest world news. Japan itself was bombed today in one of the largest air operations in the Pacific. 1500 Navy planes were launched from carriers cruising close to enemy shores. . . .

"Maybe that's it," Vic said. "Those paper houses—3000 tons of fire bombs. We'll soon be in mufti, men."

"Napalm," Frank said, suddenly. "That's the reason the two best bombing pilots in the AAF were stranded in Arizona."

"Frank," Roy said.

"Did you know that I flew co-pilot for Roy?"

"No," Vic said.

"Tell Vic about the little town in Europe you liberated, Roy," Frank said.

"Agh," Roy said. "You don't talk much, Frank; but when you do, it's too much."

Vic dimmed the lights as a car approached. He was silent.

"We were in the Eighth," Roy said. "We got engine trouble, had to turn back and jettison the bombs. We hit a little town that's all."

"By mistake," Frank said.

"By mistake," Roy said firmly. Vic raised the lights as the car passed."

"A French town," Frank said.

"By mistake," Roy said.

"And here we are," Frank said. He twisted the radio knob and the set clicked off.

"What's the matter with here?" Roy said. "We're doing all right. You think you're doing bad, you do bad. You believe in yourself you're all right."

Vic stepped on the floor button again. "You guys sound like an old married couple."

"You know who you remind me of, Frank?" Roy said. "This case in Brazil I read about. A couple of crooks in Brazil wanted to kill a guy without any risk. They blindfolded the guy and told him they were going to cut his wrists and let him bleed to death. Then they pulled the *back* of a knife blade across his wrists, not even breaking the skin. It felt like a slash, but it wasn't. Then they dripped warm water down over his hand and let it plop . . . plop . . . into a bucket. And all the time they talked about how deep the cut was, and how fast the blood was flowing, and how white the guy's face was. You know what happened?"

"You told me that story before," Frank muttered.

"What happened?" Vic said.

"The guy died. Not a mark on him. Believed himself to death."

"Hell," Vic said. "If the crimes so perfect, how do *you* know about it?"

"One of the guys went nuts, and babbled to the police."

"What made him go nuts?" Vic said.

Roy shifted and looked at Frank and then looked at Vic. "I don't know," he said. "They still couldn't convict the guy of murder."

Frank loosed a short bark of laughter. "If talking somebody to death was murder, Roy'd been hung a long time ago."

"It's still true," Roy said, "you can do what you think you can do—and you can't do what you think you can't do. Take our beauteous Sandra's husband, Colonel Sloane. Why won't he fly anymore? He's a perfect specimen, even at his age. Why does he get Frank and me to fly him to his meetings and things?"

"Why?" Vic said.

"He thinks he's overdue; he thinks the percentages are against him. Major Rollins puts faulty vision in the records; but he knows Sloan's lost his guts. I don't fault Sloan. He's right not to fly a plane if he doesn't believe in himself. He chooses us to fly him because he knows damn well we believe we'll get him there."

"If I had a wife as desirable as Sandra Sloan, I'd want to stay alive too," Vic said.

"Trouble is," Roy said, "when you lose it one way, you lose it all ways. He's had it with her too."

"How come you know everything?" Frank growled.

"Yeah," Vic said. "They seem to get along well—handsome couple, happy—they seem to get a kick out of each other."

Roy smiled slowly, his teeth small and white in his symmetrical face. "You sure are an observant man, Vic. Do they train all you personnel men to be so sharp?"

Vic looked away from the windshield at Roy. The smile was bright and cheerful.

"We're almost in Nogales," Vic said.

"Did we keep you from anything in town?" Roy said.

"Well," Vic said, "I was going to surprise Consuela."

"Consuela," Roy said. "Sounds Mex."

"You can skip that," Vic said.

"Sure," Roy said.

The car topped a rise and gathered speed downward. Below were the scattered lights of Nogales, flickering under the stars of the warm night.

Vic drove slowly down the avenue along the railroad tracks, past low, flat-roofed buildings. "Where to?" Vic said. "I don't know this town."

"Keep going," Roy said. "I'll tell you."

The car passed International Street. Roy said, "Cut into the alley on the right."

Vic turned the wheel sharply, and the car crept slowly through the

narrow alley. Adobe walls were inches from the car windows.

"What the hell is this?" Vic said. "A tunnel?"

"Pull in that open space," Roy said. "Behind the two-story building."

Two small squares of light cut the black wall. Vic pulled up and turned off the ignition key.

"Open your trunk, will you, Vic?" Roy said, getting out. "Frank and I will bring out the liquor."

Vic waited by the open trunk and watched the two men knock; the door open; and the two men disappear. Vic gazed through the dark at the bright windows, blank with whitewash.

A few minutes later, Roy and Frank appeared at the door, each with a case on his shoulder. Vic helped them pile the two cases in the trunk.

"Johnny Walker Red Label," Vic said. "Praise the Lord."

"Close the trunk," Roy said.

"Is that all" Vic said.

"We're going to get the rest at Amado's," Frank said. "Ouch."

"Did I bump into you?" Roy said. "I'm sorry. Vic, we have to go to the warehouse on the other side of town to pick up the rest."

"Who's Amado?" Vic said.

"I don't know," Roy said. "Frank garbles up these Mex names. All I know is the Colonel said to pick up the stuff at these addresses. Right, Frank?"

"Yeh, I guess," Frank said.

Vic closed the trunk lid. "Hey," he said. "Is this all legitimate?"

Roy laughed. "Comrade-in-arms, what ails you? We pick up the bonded stuff here, the blended stuff at a warehouse. Don't personnel men know anything about storage systems? Come on."

Vic eased the car through the alley. Roy directed him across Grand Avenue, up Park for a block, right on Morley, up East Street, left on another street, then in an alley, back a nameless street, through twisting lanes among low adobes.

Vic said nothing.

"Now, Buddy-Boy," Roy said. "Stop behind the *Cantina* ahead."

Vic parked. Roy and Frank climbed out. "We'll get the good but cheaper stuff here," Roy said. "We'll be out in a shake."

"I'll come in and help carry the stuff out," Vic said.

"No," Roy leaned close, his voice low, "Listen, Vic, good liquor's scarce, and I think this guy is getting stuff from Mexico. He's a little touchy about who he deals with. He knows us; the Colonel sent us down before. But you . . . you understand, Vic?"

"If the Colonel knows about it," Vic said. "O.K."

Roy showed his teeth again. "Sure, Vic. Only I don't think the Colonel wants you to know he knows. Prudence, dear friend, prudence."

"All right, all right," Frank said. "Don't spend the whole night."

Roy and Frank entered the Cantina. The air was clammy; then light shone from a single overhead lamp; the smell of beer was dank and sharp. An aged nickelodeon planged and moaned. A small brown man stood at the bar, crushing a slice of lemon, idly, into a shot glass.

An old man with thin arms and a great flat nose washed glasses behind the bar.

"Señor Amado?" Frank said.

"A dentro," the *Indio* said, turning his nose toward a red door. He pushed a button two times and waited. A long buzz sounded.

"Go in."

Behind the scarred red door was a large, softly-lit room. The two officers walked silently across a deep-pile Oriental rug. Along the wall were two green metal filing cabinets. An air conditioner purred on the window sill. A swart man in a light tan tropical suit rose from behind a wide mahogany desk and watched them approach.

"Señores," he said. His body was thick, his face heavy and unsmiling. "The merchandise is ready. The back door will be open for you. Two hundred and eighty-eight dollars, please."

"My," Roy said. "The Mexican executive."

Amado sat. He said, patiently, "Two hundred and eighty-eight dollars in cash. For eight cases, with labels and stamps."

Roy opened an envelope and counted bills. "One hundred, ninety-two dollars, *Señor Hidalgo Amado.* Per agreement. Two bucks a bottle. Not three."

Amado said, "Labels cost me more; stamps cost me more; the danger is greater. The price is three dollars a bottle."

Roy said, "We're the ones who take chances. You don't want the money, leave it."

Amado counted the money. "Eight cases, the back door," he said. "Next time I don't handle small-time orders."

Roy laughed. "Señor Amado, I don't blame you. Can you get up five hundred cases?"

Amado studied Roy's face. "Three dollars a bottle," he said.

"Two dollars," Roy said.

"I run an operation," Amado said. "I am efficient. I have an organization. Three dollars."

"Can you deliver anywhere in the state?" Roy said.

"With two weeks notice, anywhere."

"All right," Roy said. "Three dollars a bottle—delivered."

"For delivery upstate," Amado said, "there must be extra . . ."

"Yes, or no?" Roy said.

"Yes."

"Then you'll hear from us soon, Amado," Roy said. "Now get your man in to load us up."

They had to wake Vic, who was asleep behind the wheel, his head against the window frame. He folded down the front seat. He piled

cases in back as Roy and Frank brought them.

In the building for the last load, Roy said, "I'm going to split it now." He counted money into Frank's hand. "Three hundred forty-four cold United States bills, Frank my friend."

Frank rolled the bills, fished a rubber band from his pocket, and made a cylinder.

"You like that easy money?" Roy said.

"Yeah."

"Then keep your damn mouth shut."

"What the hell ails you?" Frank said.

"You talk once all night," Roy said, "and you say *Amado's*. The less he knows the better. After the maze I led him through, he doesn't even know where he is. But you got to give him a name."

"You expecting trouble?" Frank said.

"No. And I don't want any. Understand?"

"Keep off my ass," Frank said. "If you don't want trouble."

"Whatta ya know?" Roy said. "Old hot-shot's got hurt feelings. C'mon, buddy boy, put your money away and we'll go goose our wheelman."

"Yeah," Frank said. "He's a dilly, ain't he?"

The cases in the back of the coupe made a wall. In the rear seat behind the wall, Vic slept.

Roy climbed behind the wheel, Frank went around to the other side. The motor started, and Vic awoke. "Hey," he said, "I painted myself into a corner."

"Sure," Roy said, "you sleep, Vic. I'll drive back."

"O.K.," Vic's voice was muffled. "O.K."

The moon was full and the roads deserted. The two officers did not talk. In the deadness of the Arizona waste, the motor's hum was alive and insistent. Vic occasionally caught his breath in his sleep. Frank stared through the windshield at the pale shapes of the moon-lit desert.

They reached Cortaro at 12:30 A.M. Roy pulled into the driveway of Vic's rented home.

Frank shook Vic awake.

"You go on in to bed," Roy said. "We'll take the car into the base and unload. We'll bring it back for you in the morning. Right, Vic?"

Vic clambered over the boxes and out the door. "Yeh," he said, rubbing his face. "Yeh. Sure. Swell."

Roy and Frank drove away. Vic stood in the driveway, blinking, searching in his pockets.

"Boy howdy," Roy said, looking into the rear-view mirror. "A real pigeon." He winked at Frank. "I want to make sure somebody sees this car on the post tonight. It's always handy to have a fall guy when you need one."

"You're smart, all right," Frank said. "Maybe."

"Our pigeon," Roy said.

CHAPTER II

Colonel Sloane sat on the bed and watched his wife at the vanity. Sandra studied her image. Before her were brushes, puffs, tweezers, powder boxes, perfume bottles, buffers, tubes, scissors.

"Darling," the colonel said. "Before you start, you are the most beautiful, delightful, desirable woman in Arizona. What do you expect to be when you finish?"

Hairpin between her teeth, Sandra laughed. "Who else but me knows that the old military ogre is a gay and gallant cavalier?"

"Old?" the colonel said. "You've kept me young, Sandra. After thirteen years, I still react to you. Look at you. Even in a negligée, you're still twenty—every shining succulent inch of you."

"Calm down," Sandra said. "I'm thirty-three and you're fifty-five. I want to sleep with you, Colonel William Sloane; not with an insurance policy." She twisted on the bench and examined the profile of her breast in the mirror.

The colonel rose, smoothed the crease in his palm beach trousers, and shrugged into his uniform coat. Tall, lean, gray-haired, he stood above her.

"The next one," he said, "will not only get you, he'll get money too. Sandra, my shy little, quaint little Mennonite Maid, don't wish me gone."

"Oh, honey," she said, pouting into the mirror. "Don't joke about it. With you gone, what would I be —except a rich young beautiful widow?"

The colonel pulled on his cap. "And this is the demure little Mennonite I married."

"You married an ex-Mennonite," Sandra said. "Like my aunt says, 'Ach, Sondra, you vent gay, you vent gay!' "

The colonel gripped her arms and kissed her ear. "I'll pick you up for the party in an hour, honey."

"William," Sandra turned on the bench. "You know I adore you."

"I know," the colonel said. "I do know." He kissed her and left.

Sandra pulled steadily at her hair with the brush. "You ought to know," she said to the blank door. "Hard as I work at it."

She put the brush down and looked closely into the glass. "Damn it," she said. "It's all there and what am I doing with it? Stalled."

Na, like the little Pennsylvania Dutch girl she had been in Elizabethtown. With the little red wagon, she coasted down the hill always. That was fun, it was fast, her red hair used to stream in the wind. And the wagon would slow and slower until it stopped—unless she turned right a block earlier where a new and steeper slope (but rocky, and Momma said no don't go down it's *gefehrlick*) fell away. Sandra always turned, her hair lifting again to stream again. Sometimes

she got whipped, but it was better than being stalled in the wagon.

Sandra laughed. "What the hell makes everybody think Mennonite girls are so innocent? By the time I was nineteen I was expert at the only fun available to us Plain People. Doch, the plainer a girl was, the better she was at it. Oh, Bill, you could take lessons from some of those Mennonite boys. Oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, my." She bit her lip and pulled the flesh taut under her chin. "Oh, my."

CHAPTER III

The party hushed when the Colonel and Sandra appeared under the archway. The new officers, lately cadets, bars and wings gleaming, turned their wives and sweethearts and Tucson USO girls to see. The cadre officers began to drift across the floor.

"Selah," Lieutenant Roy Carlton said to the enlisted men behind the bar. "The panjandrum and his pippin are here. Now remember the Colonel and His Lady get only scotch. Blackford, Jennings, and I get only scotch. Other cadre officers get scotch first and are then switched to the other stuff. The cherry officers get *only* the other stuff. That's the order of the day. Straight?"

"Yes, sir," a bartender said. The three enlisted men watched Roy stroll away.

"Well, men," the first bartender said, "if good scotch is that rare . . ."

They each took a bottle of *Johnny Walker* and wedged it underneath the bar against the floor.

"Well, now," the bartender said, his hands spread on the counter, "us draftees are ready for business."

Roy stopped beside Frank. "There she is," he said. "Simple green sheath; glowing red hair; creamy sun-cured skin; warm, wild blue yonder eyes; tasteful and sparing jewelry—look at her move under that dress!"

"Shut up," Frank said.

"Like a sunrise in Oak Creek Canyon," Roy said.

"Shut up," Frank said.

"I'd like to bang that and bang that and bang that," Roy said.

"Shut up," Frank said.

"And bang that," Roy said.

Frank turned and walked toward the bar. The dance floor was crowded. People moved aside for him.

The Colonel, erect, spare, greyhaired, greeted his officers individually. Glints danced from metal and leather. He put his hand on Vic's shoulder. "Vic, would you dance with Mrs. Sloan? I'm held up here."

"If Mrs. Sloan would consent?" Vic said, smiling.

"Indeed she would," Sandra said.

The six-piece band was playing "Melancholy Baby." Sandra yielded herself to Vic and they joined the dancers. Vic's hand pressed gently against her back.

Her body was fragrant. He lay his cheek against her hair. They danced, her breasts firm and soft against him.

"Mrs. Sloan," he said.

"You know my name is Sandra." Her voice was sleepy.

"Sandra," Vic said. "I want you to know that I've seen the Taj Mahal."

"Oh," Sandra said. "The Taj Mahal?"

"And I've been to the Louvre in Paris."

"The Louvre in Paris?"

"And I spent a week admiring the Sistine in Rome."

"Good heavens, Vic," she raised her head. "You've been to a lot of places. But I certainly don't know where you're going."

Vic laughed, spreading his fingers against her back. "I want to tell you without being offensive that I admire beauty wherever it appears."

Her fingernail idly touched his neck. "How could that possibly be offensive?"

"And that I've never seen beauty so pure as it appears tonight."

"Oh?"

"In the form of Mrs. Sloan."

She laughed. "Well, you did get where you were going, didn't you?"

"Seriously," Vic said. "I mean no more than a statement of the truth."

"Taj Mahal?" Sandra said, musingly. "The Louvre? The Sistine?"

A hand touched Vic's shoulder "May I cut in?" Frank said.

Vic stepped back. Sandra said, "But they're just for spectators, aren't they, Vic?" and moved away in Frank's arms.

"Just for spectators?" Vic muttered. "Just for spectators?" He twisted through the dancers toward the bar.

Roy was at the counter, watching the men pour drinks. "Hi, Vic," he said. "Having a ball?" He turned to the bartender. "A scotch-and-soda for Lieutenant Jennings."

"Thanks," Vic said. He took the drink. "I just danced with Mrs. Sloan."

"Where's your girl?" Roy said. "That, that what's-her-name you told us about?"

"Forget her name," Vic said, "and she doesn't like parties."

"Sure, I understand."

"Understand what?"

"She doesn't like parties," Roy said.

Over the scotch and soda Vic saw Sandra and Frank dance by. Her fingernail lay against Frank's neck. Vic put his drink on the bar.

"Look at your friend," Vic said. "He's smiling. I didn't know he could."

"Oh, Frank can," Roy said. "If he's got enough reason."

"I guess he's got enough reason," Vic said.

Roy turned resting his elbows against the bar, and looked at the dancers. "Oh, yes. Yes indeed," he said.

One of the new officers bumped into Vic. "Pardon me, pardon me,"

the officer said. "Please!" He rushed toward a French window, opened it, and plunged into the dark.

The six-man band was playing "Blue Skies." A girl—U.S.O.?—was clutching the microphone and singing. Vic looked at the open window.

The officer appeared—a pasty-faced boy, a handkerchief against his lips—and walked unsteadily toward the cloak room.

Vic touched Roy's arm, and nodded toward the wavering officer. "What do you suppose is with him?"

Roy studied the man. "Ah," he said. "He ate something." He pushed away from the bar, walked among the dancing couples, and tapped Frank on the shoulder. Sandra smiled at Roy.

"No," Frank said, and turned back to Sandra.

"Frank, lad," Roy said. "Officers should share their fortunes. Shoulder to shoulder, old man."

"We share, all right," Frank said, and walked abruptly from the floor.

"What did he mean by that?" Sandra said, resisting Roy's arms. "I'm beginning to feel like a box of K-rations."

The pressure of Roy's arms relaxed. "I'm sorry," he said. "Please don't misunderstand."

Shs surrendered to his arms and the music.

"Frank and I have been together a long time," Roy murmured. "We've made some business deals together. It was a poor joke on my part. Nobody, Mrs. Sloan, would consent to share your attention with anyone else."

"Profitable business deals?" Sandra said.

Roy was silent. "Profitable," he said.

"I respect profits," Sandra said.

"Sandra," Roy said, tentatively. She moved rhythmically in his arms, waiting.

"Sandra," he said. "I believe you do. Didn't your husband own a aeronautical enginering firm before the war?"

"He still does," Sandra said.

"And—forgive me—he must be thirty years older than you?"

"Nearer twenty," Sandra said.

"I believe you do respect profits."

She was silent.

He held her closely. "But money isn't everything?"

"Money's important." They were dancing slowly, moving only slightly.

"But not everything?"

"Not everything." Her voice was sleepy.

"My God," Roy said. "Life's good again. You don't know what I mean, Sandra, but I mean it. Let's slip out for a walk. Please."

"All right," Sandra said. "But don't you misunderstand me."

"I don't," Roy said. "Its just that we're both young, and we both like profits, and we both—well, we're both honest, in a way, aren't we?"

Sandra widened her eyes. "In a

way, Lieutenant. In a way."

Outside, Roy reached for her hand. "I feel like a schoolboy. Can I hold your hand, Becky Thatcher?"

Sandra said, "Lieutenant, this won't work with me. I like my husband, he's good to me, I'm faithful to him."

"Sandra," Roy said. "I know what I need; I know what you need. I'm not going to jump you in the bushes. If you don't like anything I do, you slap me and walk away. I won't chase you."

"Na, Mensch!" Sandra's laugh was full-throated. "So blunt and brutal!"

"Sandra." He turned. "We're on the edge of something good here."

"For instance?"

"Frank and I may have a quick big deal going soon. Lots of money."

"My husband has lots of money."

"Money to spend now? On you? With you? And more than money?" He grasped her.

"I'm only a country girl," Sandra said, quiet and peaceful under his hands. "You scare me."

He took his hands from her flesh and she moved nearer.

"Just see me again," Roy said. "See me again."

"I'll be honest." Her voice was alert. "I want to see you again. Now take me inside."

They walked along the flagstone path beside the pool. Beyond them an officer crouched, bending over the water. Sandra and Roy stopped. The officer vomited.

"Oh," Sandra said.

Roy led her off the path to a French window. "There's a law against children drinking," he said.

"We swim in that pool," Sandra said, her arms crossed over her breast.

"If that's all that disturbs you, honey," Roy said, "rest your soul. The pool empties and refills itself completely every three hours, I think it is."

Closing the French windows behind them, they stood and watched. The center of the floor was empty. A blonde girl, lank hair falling over her face, pressed a handkerchief against stains on her bosom. Sweat gleamed on her skin.

A splash sounded outside.

Men were gathered around chairs; a group of officers stood by the bar as Colonel Sloan shouted and gesticulated at the enlisted men.

"My God," Sandra said. "What's wrong?"

Roy's face set. "We'll see."

Colonel Sloan was shouting at Vic. "Who's responsible for this god-damned whiskey?"

"I don't know," Vic said. "Roy Carlton and Frank Blackford picked it up as you ordered."

"As *I* ordered!" the colonel said. "Carlton, come here!"

A bartender suddenly sat on the floor.

"Carlton," the colonel said. "Where did you get this liquor?"

Roy shook his head. "Pardon me, Mrs. Sloan," he said, guiding her to a chair beside the colonel. "Sir," he said, "we didn't get the liquor. Lieutenant Jennings offered to get it for us. We gave him the money and he brought us the liquor in his car. I don't know where he got it, but I'm sure that Vic wouldn't . . ."

"I got the liquor," Vic said. "I got the liquor?"

The colonel raised an empty bottle and shook it. "Moonshine," he said. "A cigarette butt in the bottom. Smell it. What the hell is it—kerosene?" He slammed the bottle on the bar. "Jennings," he said. "Tell me where you got this stuff. I'm going to court-martial you out of this army—and if anybody dies from this fusel oil, I'll have you up for murder!"

"I got the liquor?" Vic whispered. "Colonel, they asked me to drive them to Nogales—Blackford and Carlton—I don't know what they got or even where they got it."

The colonel struck the bar. "I can see the headlines in the paper now. *Officers and Guests Poisoned in Wild Party*. Jennings . . ."

Vic seized Roy's arm. "Carlton, what the hell is this? Tell the Colonel I did *you* a favor, I lent you my car, I drove for you, I did you and Blackford a favor. Tell him!"

Roy stood, unmoving. "Christ, Vic, I'm sorry. I truly am. You did do us a favor, getting the whisky and bringing it to us."

Vic's hand dropped. "You son of a bitch," he said. "You incredible son of a bitch."

Jennings." The colonel's voice shook. "Tomorrow morning Carlton and Blackford fly me to a training command meeting in Fort Worth. You be on the base when we get back. About 2100. We're all going down to Nogales and somebody's going to show me where this poison came from."

Two enlisted men with red-cross brassards carried a woman on a stretcher past the officers.

"Sweet Jesus," the colonel said. "Is that one of those USO women? I'll have somebody's ass for this if it kills me."

CHAPTER IV

In the bachelor officer's quarter, Roy shifted in his bed. "Frank," he said, "that old bastard's rich. What do you suppose he'd leave Sandra if he died?"

Seated on the bed by the window, Frank held his shoe and examined it. "Sandra," he said. He put the shoe on the floor beside its mate. "Money. A business, insurance, property. Money."

"And what," Roy said, "would that delectable young thing do with all that money?"

"She's older than you," Frank said.

"About your age?" Roy said.

"About," Frank said.

"She seems to like you," Roy said.

"Yeah," Frank said. "Yeah. She does. Seem to."

"Well?" Roy said.

"Well what?"

"Listen, you damn fool," Roy said. "We're in trouble—that's well what. In about six hours we fly the Colonel to Forth Worth. After that we all go to Nogales to check on the booze. Hot as that son of a bitch is, he won't stop until he finds the source. And then we're dead."

"Ah," Frank said. "He thinks Jennings swung a deal. You sold him that."

"How long is he going to buy that if Vic fights? If Vic can identify the place in Nogales? If Vic remembers that goddam name you gave him? Do you realize that if anybody dies from that slop Amado rang in, we're eligible for a murder rap? Or manslaughter—or some goddam thing."

Frank folded down the sheet. "Why tell me," he said. "You're so damn smart."

"What did the Colonel say before he left the dance?" Roy raised himself on an elbow.

"Don't start that goddamn nonsense," Frank said. "Tell me. Don't ask me."

"He said that he'd have somebody's ass if it killed him."

"Yeah," Frank said.

"Well," Roy said. "There's your choice."

"What choice?" Frank said. "For Christ's sake, what choice?"

"Our ass," Roy said. "Or him."

Frank laughed shortly. "What are you going to do—jettison a load on him too?"

Roy said, "All you got to do, Buddy-boy, is fly the plane tomorrow. I got a plan."

"Well, don't tell me," Frank said. "I've had enough of your plans."

"I wouldn't tell you anyhow," Roy said. "You just fly the plane. Don't forget, I'm pulling your chestnuts out of the fire, too."

"Who pushed them in?" Frank said.

"Old laugh-a-minute Frank," Roy said, clutched a pillow in his arms, and rolled over. "Dream sweetly; Daddy will watch over you."

Frank clicked off the overhead light. "Roy," he said, "do you think that Sandra really. . . ."

Roy was silent.

Frank lay awake, listening to Roy breathe in his sleep.

CHAPTER V

The sergeant slept on a cot in the dispensary. Early morning sun spread thin light in the office. Vic shook the sergeant's arm.

The sleeping man rubbed his arm and shifted, the cot creeking.

"Sergeant!" Vic said.

The man sat up. "Yes, Sir," he said. His eyes were wide.

"Relax," Vic said. "It's only six o'clock. I wanted to find out about the patients."

The man lay down and put his

hand over his eyes. "Most of them are all right, sir. Big heads, bloodshot eyes, vomiting, diarrhea—they're coming around."

"Good," Vic said. "That's good. What caused it?"

"We're not sure"—the man uncovered his eyes—"Lieutenant Jennings. Major Rollins sent some of the whisky to a lab. He suspects harmful congeners."

"Could it have been tainted food?" Vic said.

The sergeant sat up and buttoned his shirt. "It could be, sir, but nobody thinks so. The Old Man said he was going to make a personal investigation, starting with a trip to Nogales."

"Nogales," Vic said.

The sergeant stood. "Boy, Lieutenant, that must have been a ball last night."

"Yes," Vic said.

"The first time I was ever glad I can't afford whisky," the sergeant said.

"All right, sergeant," Vic said. "Thanks."

"A lot of people interested," the sergeant said. "Lieutenants Carlton and Blackford woke me about a half-hour ago. They were on their way to check out an AT-11 for the Old Man's flight at seven."

Vic said, "The Colonel ought to be here soon, then."

"That Carlton's a sport," the sergeant said. "He left five dollars on the desk for disturbing me."

Vic opened the door. "You're lucky he didn't leave you a bottle of whisky."

Vic walked across the lot toward the administration building. The air was cool. Orange streaked the vast Arizona sky. Above the mountain barrier, a rim of sun burned.

Vic stacked papers on his desk. He began to read a report and threw the paper back on the desk. He lit a cigarette and stubbed it out. He sharpened a pencil and broke the point against the desk blotter.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Jesus Christ."

The office was deserted. Vic broke the pencil between his fingers.

The door swung open and Colonel Sloan strode in. His face was pale and lined.

"Good morning, Sir," Vic said.

The Colonel stopped at the door to his office, looked at Vic, and went in. The door slammed.

"Jesus Christ," Vic said.

Colonel Sloan came from his office, a musette bag slung at his side. He walked past Vic and out the door.

Vic went to the window. The Colonel walked across the empty lot toward the operations building, his shoulders now slumped, his pace now slow.

Vic watched him disappear.

Engines coughed into life; the AT-11 taxied onto a strip; the rumble steadied into the roar of the take-off.

Vic sat down to his work.

The office was quiet and he completed seven personnel reports. No one spoke to him.

He dialed an off-base number. Consuela was a secretary at the University library. He talked to her, his voice cheerful, and she agreed to meet him in front of the museum at five.

At three the desert heat had closed in. Vic drove home through the glare, his chest heavy. In the rented house in Cortari, he turned on the air conditioner and stood long and passive in the shower. Naked and wet, he took the telephone from the cradle, dialed 2 to busy the line, and lay the receiver on the table. He fell naked on the bed and slept.

Yes, he said to Mother. I didn't do it. His mother believed him and that's why he always told the truth: she didn't believe him because he told the truth; he told the truth because she believed him. And that's what life was: truth and belief. The truth was believed. What wasn't believed wasn't truth. If she didn't believe him, he was a liar. If he told the truth and it wasn't believed, he was a liar. It was smoking and drinking and no Mom I didn't and he hadn't. And he hadn't because she believed it. And nobody believed him. So he had bought whisky and stolen money and poisoned people. The truth was believed. Believe the truth. He had poisoned. He had stolen. He . . .

He woke. Sudden sweat evaporating from his body made him shiver. Oh, I'm a man, he thought, an officer, a fighter. The least strain, the smallest trouble, and I'm a child running to mother again. Nobody ever had trouble before? Why would anybody hurt little Vic? Loveable little Vic? The soft-fleshed little baby masquerading as a man.

The truth is, he thought, a man deserves what he lets happen to him.

The truth is, he thought, a man deserves what he accepts.

Like it or not.

Mama, he thought. Jesus Christ.

Those bastards got all day in that plane to sell Sloan. To persuade Sloan. To invent detail after detail. To shake their heads sadly about Jennings. To find sympathetic excuses for Jennings. To convince Sloan.

He rose and dressed.

In the Buick, heat baked, he drove toward Tucson through the whiteness and the motionless air. He turned right from Speedway Boulevard onto Park, and drove slowly past the red-brick buildings of the campus. He parked near the museum and, sitting on the fender, waited for Consuela.

She came. Smiling at him from a block away. She was unhurried and almond-eyed and deep-breasted. Her smile was white. Olive skin, black hair, tiny ear lobes. She waved easily at him.

Vic sighed. When she came near, he met her, bent and kissed her tenderly. "Querida," he said.

"A nice welcome," Consuela said. "A nice welcome indeed." She patted his cheek. "But, Victor, to kiss me on the street, this is not like you. This is not, you tell me, the Anglo-Saxon Iowa way."

"I kiss you," Vic said, stiffly, "because that is what I want most to do."

"Ah?" Consuela said. She looked at him. "You do not want to joke, do you, Victor?"

"Sure I do, Querida," Vic said. "I'm just clumsy. Let's find a good restaurant. What would you like?"

"You know I trust what you choose, Victor." He closed the door behind her and climbed in the driver's side.

Consuela held his hand still on the ignition key. "Victor, your face is so heavy, your voice is so tight. Are you angry?"

"Consuela, please, it's nothing."

"Amador mio," she said. "It is as you wish."

They went to the *Pioneer*. The steaks were large and sizzling, served on wooden planks. Vic ate automatically. Consuela ate slowly, serenely. Neither spoke.

After dinner, Vic said. "Would you like to go for a ride in the desert? It will be cool and peaceful."

"You spend all your time in the desert," Consuela said. "Perhaps it would relax you more to see a movie or to dance, no?"

"It would relax me more to see a movie or to dance, no," Vic said. "Not at all."

Consuela was silent until they were in the car. "I don't think," she said, "that it is kind to make fun of the way I talk."

"Honey, honey," Vic said. "I like the way you talk. It is like music. It pleases me. Consuela, I talk like an Iowan, you talk like a Mexican. There's nothing wrong."

Consuela sat upright, full bosom taut. "I have told you before. I am not Mexican. I am Spanish. My name is that of Conquistadores. I am Consuela Rosa Erlinda Serena y Delgado."

"All right, Consuela, all right. You're Spanish. But what the hell's wrong with being Mexican, I don't know."

"Nothing is wrong. It is just that I am Spanish."

Vic drove on the highway. Traffic was sparse. His jaw ached and a muscle twisted in his cheek.

"Victor," Consuela said. "This is all nonsense. We do not—we can not hurt each other. What is hurting you?"

Vic drove on. Consuela waited. He pulled the car off the road into a sandy clearing. He parked by a clump of mesquite.

"I ought to tell you," Vic said. "Because you will hear about it anyhow. And what you hear later won't be the truth. I will be an embarrassment to you, Consuela."

"Not to me," Consuela said.

He told her of the visit of Roy and Frank two nights before, the desert trip, the party, the sicknesses, the angry colonel, the lies, the futility, the pending investigation.

"So all I can do is yell I didn't do it, I didn't do it, like a frustrated four year old." He smiled weakly at Consuela.

"But, Victor," Consuela said, "the investigation will clear you. It must clear you!"

"What can they investigate?" Vic said. "All I know is Nogales. I can't tell investigators where to go. I don't know. The investigation can't convict me, but it can't clear me either. I'll be suspected from now till I die. There's just nothing to do."

"Victor," she said. "Querido mio, how terrible. How terrible."

"Not so terrible, honey," Vic said, lifting her face. "Now."

"Amador mio, Amador mio," Consuela said.

"Amador?" Vic said. "Amador?"

"Only lover, my darling," Consuela said. "You are my lover."

"Amador," Vic said quietly. "That's what the name was."

"Amador?" Consuela said.

"Amado. Amado. The name those bastards told me. The bootlegger in Nogales. Amado!"

"You can help the investigation?" Consuela said.

"Ho, yes, Lord! Consuela, you are my heart and my head and my good right arm. I love you!"

"We will talk of that," Consuela said, "when you can think of that."

"Won't you please come home, Bill Sloan!" Vic said. "I'm ready for Nogales now."

"What will this Amado say when they question him?" Consuela said. "Yes I did it, I sell bootleg, I poison people?"

"Don't discourage me, honey," Vic said. "At least, I have hope now. Because of you, Consuela who lifteth me up."

He turned in the seat and brought Consuela to him, her breasts warm against him, her lips soft and full under his.

"No, Victor," she murmured. "to make love is not an afterthought. It is not for this night. Your thoughts—and mine—are for your trouble."

Vic's hand was in the warmth of her lap. He felt the strong rounded thighs under his fingers.

She drew his head to her breast and kissed his hair.

Vic closed his eyes, resting in the fragrance and quiet. "I have no troubles, Consuela, while I'm with you."

She lifted his face and smiled.

"You're right, Consuela," Vic said. "Not tonight."

"But if you need . . .?" Consuela said.

"No, Consuela, you're right. It should be more than need with us. We'll go and have a drink, and we'll dance."

"And tomorrow," Consuela said, smiling, "the men will be exposed, and the evil will disappear, and

there will be only us again. *Es Verdad?"*

"Es you bet your life *verdad,"* Vic said. He gripped her thigh lingeringly and let go. *"Es completemente verdad."*

Vic backed the car onto the highway and drove toward Tucson. Consuela drew her legs up on the seat and curled against him. Vic sang, ". . . . it was Mañana, and I was so gay-y-y, South of the Border, Down Mexico Way."

"Ai, i, i, i," Consuela said.

Vic parked the car in the *Casa de Violeta* lot. He lifted Consuela above the ground, put her down, and gravely offered his arm. She laughed and rested her hand lightly on his. They moved in measured step to the canopied entrance.

"This is where I show you off, Consuela. Most officers from the base hang out here."

They stood at the bar, looking around the dimly lit room for an empty table. A tall blond man rose from the far end of the bar. "Vic!" he called and strode toward them.

"Hello," Vic said. "Consuela, this is Lieutenant Dore, maintenance officer at the base."

"Pleased," the blond man said. "Vic, I've been looking for you since four o'clock. Couldn't get you at the office or at your house."

"What did you want?" Vic said.

"I thought you should know."

"Know what?"

"You know Colonel Sloan flew to Fort Worth today?"

"Sure I know," Vic said.

"On the way back, the plane crashed near Cochise."

"Good God," Vic said. "They ditch?"

"Yes."

"Good," Vic said. "How did it happen?"

"Chochise Control got a report from the AT 11 that the three officers had failed to put out a fire in the tail section and were bailing out."

"Well, I'm glad it ended all right."

Lieutenant Dore was silent.

Vic took Consuela's arm. "Won't you join us at a table, Dore?"

"Colonel Sloan is dead."

Vic sat on a bar stool. "My God. Didn't his chute open?"

"Yes, it did. He just landed dead. Not a mark on him. They're going to run an autopsy on him. Heart attack, probably."

"Oh, Jesus," Vic said. He looked up. "How did the fire start?"

"They're investigating that, too."

Vic stared at the blond man.

"Just thought you'd want to know," Dore said. "Glad to meet you, Miss. See you back at the field, Vic."

"Yeah," Vic said. "Thanks." He watched the blond officer walk back to his drink.

Consuela touched Vic's arm. "This is very bad news?"

"Who wants a man dead?" Vic said. "But it's even worse. I'll never clear myself now. My name will

just go on stinking in everybody's nostrils. Maybe they'll even suspect me of jimmying the plane."

"Oh, Vic," Consuela said.

He shook his head. "Agh," he said. "Consuela, forget it. Let's go find a table and enjoy ourselves." He stood.

"If you want, Victor," Consuela said, "we can go back to the desert. . . ."

"No," Vic said, his voice empty, "I better get to the base. I'll take you home."

"As you say, Victor."

He touched her face. "Consuela, I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Victor." She smiled. "I will be waiting."

CHAPTER VI

Officers strolled into the auditorium. They sat in groups around the hall. Some twisted in their seats to talk to others in the row behind. Men called from group to group. Noise mounted. Laughter was spasmodic.

"TAIN-*hut!*"

The officers sprang erect.

A short, swarthy man walked slowly down the aisle. He was in summer uniform, the eagles of a colonel on the tabs of the open collar. At the front of the hall, he looked over the standing officers. Finally, he said, "Seats."

The officers sat.

"My name is Colonel Bello," the voice was soft. "I succeed Colonel Sloan in command of this installation. I want to meet you. I want you to meet me. We have a job to do together and immediately."

He looked lingeringly around the auditorium. His eyes were large and heavy-lidded.

"And that job is," he said, his soft voice almost inaudible, "to clean up this God-damned disgrace you call an army air field. This place has been notorious for bad discipline. To bad discipline you add a drinking scandal. To a drinking scandal you add a fatality possibly caused by the operational negligence evident on this base."

He pushed his fingers through his black curly hair.

"Gentlemen, take note. The following regulations will obtain immediately. No parties—graduation or otherwise—on this base. Every man who leaves the base will sign out, give his destination, estimate the time of his return. This applies to every man—officer, cadet, enlisted. Passes will be approved only for the Tucson area, except in emergencies. Unmarried personnel will live on the base. Rigorous inspections—both scheduled and spot—will be held. All flying officers will maintain a qualifying schedule, including a monthly night solo flight. I will issue a more complete statement of procedures after my first inspection, which will take place in three hours."

He paused. "Any questions?"

No one answered.

"An investigation into the death of Colonel Sloan is under way. I will initiate an investigation of the illicit and poisonous liquor procured by some officer or officers on this base. Officers with pertinent information are required to see me immediately. I will be on the base twenty-four hours a day, except when called away by official business, until dignity and discipline are restored to Hoffman Army Air Field."

He turned to the executive officer. "All right."

"TAIN-*hut!*" bawled the officer.

The stocky Colonel started up the aisle. A voice floated distantly from the clumps of men standing rigid and staring ahead. "Where's your organ, Luigi?"

The stocky man stopped in mid-aisle and laughed. "No organ, gentlemen," he said. "But lots of monkeys."

The officers broke as the door closed. Roy Carlton and Frank Blackford left immediately by a side exit. Other officers moved toward the rear of the auditorium. "What the hell does he mean—operational negligence?" one said. The finance officer laughed: "He means the ball is over for you goof-off line officers." A captain said, loudly, "Gentlemen, chicken is here to stay!" Lieutenant Balducci struck the inside of his right elbow and brought the right fist up stiffly: *"Ai, paisanos. Pollo Cacciatore!"*

In the office Vic said to Lieutenant Dore, "I'm glad. We'll have some system now. At least, we'll know where the hell we stand."

"You're nuts," the blond officer said. "This bastard sounds like a cannibal."

The telephone on Vic's desk rang. He answered.

"Lieutenant Jennings," the receiver said, "Colonel Bello wants you in his office right away."

"All right," Vic said and laid the phone in its cradle. "Now it starts." He went down the corridor.

A WAC sergeant nodded toward the closed door and said, "Go right in, Lieutenant Jennings. The Colonel is waiting."

Vic entered the office and saluted. Colonel Bello sat behind a desk, on which lay six sharpened pencils and a note pad. The desk surface gleamed.

Colonel Bello returned the salute and Vic stood at ease, hands behind his back.

The swarthy officer opened a drawer and took out a silver case. "Cigarette, Lieutenant?"

Vic lifted one from the case. The colonel held a lighter out and Vic bent to hold the cigarette against the flame.

"Well, Lieutenant, you've got the cigarette. That's supposed to relax the subject and establish a permissive atmosphere. Now what shall we have: a patterned interview, a non-directive interview, or an interview in depth?"

"Colonel, I get the point," Vic

said. "I'm guilty of being a personnel officer."

"No, Lieutenant Jennings, the point is are you guilty of bootlegging? And are you guilty of attempted murder?"

Vic sat on a chair. "Colonel," he said. "I don't have to . . . You've got no right . . ."

"Snap out of it," the stocky Colonel said. "I'm not accusing you of anything. I just want to get the matter on the table. These are not accusations; they are questions. Questions you want answered as much as I do. Right, Lieutenant Jennings?"

"Yes, sir." Vic stood.

"Hell," Colonel Bello said. "Sit down and relax. Forget your feelings. Fill me in. If you're guilty, I'll hang you. If you're not, I'll keep blasting until your name's clear. But I won't judge you until I've got all the evidence I can get. And don't go pathetic. I've got no feelings. Feelings aren't evidence."

"Two officers have accused me of getting the whisky," Vic said, stiffly. "But *murder?*"

"Colonel Sloan suspected you, and threatened you. Before he can investigate or carry out his threats, he dies as a result of a plane mishap. The other two men aboard are the ones who accused you. If the plane failure is an accident, it's damned convenient for you. If it's not an accident, then the clearest, most visible motive belongs to you, Lieutenant Jennings."

"Yes, sir," Vic said.

"Question number one, then: Was Sloan's death fortuitous—or contrived? Question number two: If contrived, by whom?"

Vic smiled weakly. "Colonel, you rasp rough, but I feel clean for the first time in days. All right, look: the only evidence against me is the testimony of the two officers, right?"

"Right," Colonel Bello said.

"We know Carlton and Blackford were given the money to buy the whisky—that can be verified, right?"

"Right."

"Carlton and Blackford claim they gave me the money and I bought the whisky—right?"

"Right."

"But that can't be verified, right?"

"At least it hasn't been," Colonel Bello said.

"All right, then, two possibilities exist," Vic said. "Either I'm guilty of buying poison hooch—or they are, and of collusion to frame me, to boot."

"That's right."

"Now,"—Vic paced the room—"Colonel Sloan will investigate and either they or I have reason to fear the results. Colonel Sloan dies from something that happens on their plane—and they survive. Conceivably, they have as much reason to wish him dead as I. Since it's their plane, they have more opportunity than I to kill him. Right?"

"Nicely done, Lieutenant," Colonel Bello said. "But there are flaws. One, your argument could seem to be part of a continuing attempt to incriminate Carlton and Blackford. Two, the plane malfunction endangered the lives of Carlton and Blackford; it did not endanger yours. Three, an autopsy indicates that the colonel died from natural causes; that is, he did not die from any discoverable injuries."

"Oh," Vic said.

"Mrs. Sloan believes you bought the liquor."

"Well," Vic said. "All she knows is her husband's version. And she's friendly with Roy Carlton, too."

"Friendly?"

"Oh, I just mean that he's attractive and pays a lot of attention to her at social affairs. I mean no more than that."

"You're not bad," Colonel Bello said, "at sowing suspicion yourself."

Vic hit the desk. "Good Christ, man," he said. "At worst, I'm a thief and murderer. At best, I'm a gossip and sneak. What the hell do you want from me—my head on a plate?"

"Calm down," the stocky man said.

"I'm not rumor-mongering over a backyard fence; I'm in a private office talking in confidence to an officer. I'm trying to establish my decency and innocence."

"All right, Lieutenant," the colonel said. "I baited you. Let's go on."

Vic sat and stared at the floor.

"What do you know about AT-11's?" Colonel Bello said.

"I'm a ground officer," Vic said. "Nothing. Flyers tell me the AT-11 is a good ship, but it ground-loops easily. That's all."

"Would you know how to fix a gas-line so that it would vibrate loose?"

"For Christ's sake, Colonel."

"Or any other way to get an engine to catch fire?"

Vic looked at the swarthy officer in the swivel chair. Colonel Bello opened a drawer, took out a black thick folder, and put it on the desk. "The formal report of the accident. It includes the autopsy findings on Sloan. Read it. We'll discuss it."

Vic opened the folder. The Colonel began to doodle.

The folder contained detailed statements by Lieutenants Carlton and Blackford; by the maintenance officer; by the Cochise operations officer. An annotated map of the area. Photographs of the wreckage. Investigators' reports.

"'. . . leaking connective, inflammable-fluid-carrying line,'" Vic murmured. "'Widespread effects of fire throughout wreckage and searched ground pattern indicate burning. Impact burning has eliminated any flow marks that may have resulted from fire in flight.'"

Vic looked up. "Does that imply there may not have been any fire in flight?"

Colonel Bello shrugged.

Vic held up a paper titled *History of Flight*. "It says here they were at 10,000 feet over Cochise. Isn't that near maximum elevation for an AT-11? They were going to land soon. Why that high?"

Colonel Bello smiled. "I thought you didn't know anything about AT-11's?"

Vic waited.

"Yes, it is high," the Colonel said.

"Carlton says here he tried to slip away from the fire—dive it out. Then he tried the fire extinguishers. Then he ordered the jump. Is that standard procedure?"

The colonel nodded.

" 'Cause of mishap seems to be maintenance inspection delinquency,' " Vic read aloud. " 'Inadequacies noted in pilot training program, administrative procedures staff surveillance.' "

"My worries," the swarthy officer said. "Not yours."

Vic unfastened the autopsy report. He read sections aloud. " 'Cause of death not disclosed by autopsy. No external marks on body sufficient to indicate serious injury . . . bruises on wrists from shroud lines . . . little possibility of high-altitude anoxia . . . no aeroembolism . . . no vascular defect . . . occasional small intimal plaques in coronary arteries, non contributory . . . small degree of coronary arteriosclerosis, non contributory . . . Histologic preparation reviewed by two pathologists.' "

He turned to the last page, a note appended by the mortuary officer. " 'The methods of the pathologist are sometimes inadequate to disclose the extent or the nature of even those disorders severe enough to be incompatible with life. A tentative diagnosis can only suggest that death may have resulted from some vasomotor phenomenon perhaps activated by fear.' "

Vic replaced the documents and closed the folder, "Cause of death not disclosed by autopsy," he muttered. "Vasomotor phenomenon. Phenomenon."

"You find that significant?" Colonel Bello said.

"What does *vasomotor* mean?"

"Something to do with dilation and contraction of blood vessels, I think," the colonel said.

"Peculiar phrasing," Vic said. "Vague. All the experts say is that he just died."

"Well," the colonel said, "it scares hell out of me to jump out of a plane."

"Yeah," Vic said. "But you don't die. Could he have been drugged?"

"The doctors say any drug would leave traces. The lab report checks him out clean."

"So where the hell am I?" Vic said.

"There are no charges against you, Lieutenant Jennings." The colonel pressed down his curly hair and stood.

Vic rose. "Thank you for your frankness, Colonel. May I look around to find out more, sir?"

"You certainly can, Lieutenant," Colonel Bello said. "You're a fool if you don't. Most people don't distinguish between suspicion and conviction."

"Thank you, sir." Vic saluted.

The colonel made a gesture. "Don't thank me. I haven't acted yet."

CHAPTER VII

Sandra answered the door and led Roy into the livingroom. Her black frock was simple and without ornament. Her face was pale, her lips a muted red. The scent of lavender hung fragrantly.

"Mrs. Sloan," Roy said, "I came to offer my condolences. This is a terrible tragedy for you."

Sandra sat on the cushioned arm-chair. "Yes," she said. "It is."

"At least," Roy said, "your husband left you a woman of independent means, so that you have that consolation, Mrs. Sloan."

Sandra placed her hands on the carved lion-heads of the armchair. She was silent.

"Sandra," Roy said. "You're free!"

"A lawyer sent me a report of my husband's estate," Sandra said. "I learned that my husband was president of a company he did not own. All he made was a salary, which he spent. Outside of some property he owned with his brother, he left me what any private leaves: a ten-thousand-dollar G. I. policy."

"He deceived you?" Roy said. "He didn't leave you a rich woman?"

"A G. I. policy to nurse along," Sandra said. "Ten thousand dollars to penny-pinch the rest of my life."

"Everyone thought he was rolling in money," Roy said, leaning back on the couch.

"Thirteen years," Sandra said. "For this. God damn him."

Roy watched her.

"You can leave too," Sandra said, rising. Roy lifted himself from the couch, stood before her, and gently forced her back into the lion-headed armchair.

"Sandra," he said. "I'm glad."

"Glad!"

"Honest," Roy said. "Listen, I got a deal working. For big money. What's here for either of us? You and I could cut out and go to Mexico or Rio and live the way you and I ought to live."

"Right now," Sandra said, "I'm so sick and tired of big talk I could scream."

Roy laughed. "Honey, the big talk is over." He leaned and put his hands on her shoulders. "I need your cooperation. Was Frank here today?"

"Yes."

"You know he's got a thing for you?"

Sandra moved under his hands. "Of course I know it."

"He's got cold feet," Roy said. "And I need him. He's so sick for you that if he thought it would

give him a chance with you he'd smoke a cigarette in a bathtub full of gasoline."

"What could I do?"

"Let him think you'd run away with him if he had a pile of money."

"How much money are you talking about?" Sandra said.

Roy let his hands slide to her breasts. He cupped them protectively. "One hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"How?"

"A liquor operation."

"It was you then?"

"It was me."

"What do I do," Sandra said, "when he comes to me afterwards?"

"I guarantee you," Roy said, "he doesn't come. I come."

"You come?" Sandra said.

"In every way," Roy said.

Sandra pressed against Roy's hands and rose. "All right, Roy," she said. "I trust you. Now you'd better show me to my bedroom; I feel a little faint."

"Oh, Mrs. Sloan," Roy said. "Please permit me."

She leaned against him, and lifted the back of her hand to her brow. "I fear me that I have the vapors," she said.

Roy hugged her. "Fear not, sweet maiden," he said. "I've got the spirits."

CHAPTER VIII

Two weeks had passed. No one spoke of the bootleg whisky, no one spoke of the plane crash. Colonel Bello appeared and disappeared all over the base.

Vic was worried. Was an investigation under way? Was everything dropped, leaving him "guilty but not proved?"

Colonel Bello was never in his office. To whom should Vic give the name *Amado?* What the hell good was it anyhow? He would give it to Bello, if Bello would hold still somewhere long enough.

Vic stood at a small bar in Rillito, stirring a whisky and water. The bar was deserted except for a man wearing a defense helmet. The dark air was dank with the smell of stale beer. Red bubbles chased white bubbles in a lighted tube around a clock on the wall.

Vic lifted the glass. The amber fluid was oily. He smelled it. Whisky looked and tasted like hell since the party. The party had poisoned everything.

The man down the bar lifted his head. "Hey, soldier, you know why I drink this lousy whisky?"

"You a mind-reader, fellow?" Vic said.

"I d'wanna go home," the defense worker said. "You know why?"

"Why?" Vic said.

"I d'wanna eat supper. My wife's going to have fried oatmeal."

"That's impossible," Vic said.

Sweat broke out on the man's face. He clasped a hand to his stom-

ach. "Not for my wife," he said. "You know how she fries bacon?"

"How?" Vic said.

"In butter. She fries bacon in butter."

Vic laughed.

"I love my wife," the defense worker said, staring blankly. "But she can't cook." He gestured and the bartender refilled his glass. "She fed me soup every day for twelve days when we first got married." He clutched the shot glass. "Neighbors called me the Campbell Kid." He emptied the glass. "If I'd ate anything solid, it woulda splashed."

He rose suddenly and ran lurching to the men's room.

The bartender shook his head.

"I guess you get 'em all," Vic said.

"People go crazy out here and never know it," the bartender said. "I wish I was back in green country."

"Where you from?" Vic said.

"Iowa," the bartender said.

"How 'bout that," Vic said. "Me, too. I come from near Grinnell."

The bartender threw his rag down. "Well, by damn, a white man!" He reached across the bar. "Shake, neighbor, I grew up in Searsboro."

The toilet in the men's room flushed loudly. Vic sipped his drink.

"How's the whisky?" the bartender said. "It ought to taste familiar."

"Why?" Vic said. "Tell you the truth, it tastes funny."

"It comes from your base," said the bartender. "Guy from the Officer's Club says your new C.O. clamped down on whisky and the Officer's Club has got to get rid of its stock. I had to pay a premium, but its all brand-name stuff. I got to beg to get whisky from the distributors, and then they send me all kinds of off-brands."

"From the base?" Vic pushed the glass away. "What the hell's up now?"

"What's the matter?"

"What did the officer look like? What was his name?"

"I don't know," the bartender said. "Nice-looking guy. A lieutenant."

"You get a receipt? You pay by check?"

"Now look, Lieutenant," the bartender said. "I was just making conversation. Let's talk about something else."

"Fella," Vic said. "I'll tell you something. Your ass is in a sling."

The bartender put his hands under the bar. "Talk, Lieutenant."

"Colonel Bello did not forbid whisky at the Officers' Club. Nobody has been authorized to sell whisky from the base."

"How the hell would I know?" the bartender said. "It's legal stuff, stamps, labels. I bought legal stuff."

"Maybe," Vic said. "What did the guy look like?"

"Good-looking, that's all."

"Small, white teeth, like a row of corn?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"His name?"

"I don't remember."

"I bet I can tell you. Vic Jennings?"

"Lieutenant, you know, I guess. He repeated his name about three times." The bartender picked up Vic's drink, tasted it, and furrowed his brow.

Vic took the glass and smelled the fluid. His voice was weak. "My Searsboro friend," he said. "My name is Vic Jennings."

The defense worker came whitely from the men's room and, carrying his helmet carefully against his chest, walked through the flap doors.

"What'll I do?" the bartender said. He smelled the glass.

"Put the stuff aside," Vic said. "Keep quiet until I call you. I got as much here as you."

The bartender stared at the swinging doors. "No wonder the god-damned stuff splashed," he said. "Twenty-eight hundred dollars. I was set for the rest of the god-damned war. You call me soon, Lieutenant."

CHAPTER IX

Vic checked off another name on the yellow page. He dialed the number. The air conditioner in his house had burned out again, and Vic was in undershirt and shorts.

"Ranchito Bar and Grill?" Vic said. "May I speak to the proprietor?"

A voice on the other end shouted, "Mr. Feldman, for you."

After a wait: "Feldman speaking."

"This is Lieutenant Jennings," Vic said. "The liquor shipment arrive in good order?"

"What's the matter, you didn't get your money?" Feldman said. "I paid the driver last night. Cash, like you said."

"No, Mr. Feldman," Vic said. "I just wanted to be sure you're satisfied."

"Why not?" Feldman said. "You close up another Officers' Club, I buy that too. That's how satisfied I am, Boychik. O.K.?"

"Yes, Mr. Feldman." He hung up and looked at the black phone in its cradle. "Just don't drink any, Mr. Feldman." He checked another name in the directory and dialed another number. Same response. Seventy-five percent of the Tucson bars had bought out the stock of the Hoffman Army Air Field's Officers' Club.

He dialed the Saguaro Club out in Bisbee. Yes, it was delivered yesterday. They had served it all day and customers were complaining. Could Lieutenant Jennings explain that?

Vic hung up.

What the hell am I supposed to do, Vic thought. My name is attached to bottleg spreading all over

Arizona. My name is collecting money all over Arizona. My name is making deals, cheating business men, and, God knows, poisoning and killing people. What the hell am I supposed to do? It can't be for real. I'm sick to my guts. How do people like Carlton and Blackford think? Is it a game people play and I don't know how to play? I'm sick. I'm a goddam sick yellow coward and I'd like to cry. Weep like a goddam woman.

He lay on the cool-sheeted bed. Tell Bello? Bello would know soon enough, when tavern owners and barkeepers started calling to find out how come customers were throwing up or passing out—or dying.

He sat up. Actually he was clear. No buyer would identify Vic's face as that of the seller. Bello would muster the officers, and Carlton would be recognized.

Well, hell, Carlton must be stupid. Enough rope and he'd already hung himself. Vic wiped his hand over his wet face and smiled.

Carlton wasn't stupid."

Sweat broke on Vic's face again. Carlton wasn't stupid. Everything else. But not stupid. He must have God knows how much money in cash dollars and cents on him right this minute.

He must be going to get out from under, Vic thought. The money's rolling in and he's going to take it and leave. Desert? What the hell was desertion to him—or to Blackford? But they'd have to leave soon—before the tavern-owners descended.

Today. Today or tomorrow they'd disappear.

Vic groaned and rolled on the hot, damp bed. And that woman who believed Vic bought the whisky—the beautiful widow with the cool skin and the soft breasts and the sleepy voice. You don't suppose that Roy has my name and all the money in the world and somehow that cool soft woman's body too?

And if I better do something, I better do it immediately. Now, in this breathless, heavy heat. Now. He slept.

He was flying. His arms were great feathered planes. He sideslipped, banked, and soared. His great wings pulsed steadily and he surged up, up, in the limitless air.

He folded his wings and plummeted. He opened his wings, braked, and his fall became a graceful swoop, a parabola in clean space. Vic sang, plying his wings, soaring up and over in gargantuan somersaults. He whooped, swinging wildly from wing to wing, sculling through the high and empty.

The sun was bright above him. With long, powerful strokes, Vic drove up through the vast blue. Clouds parted before him and trailed streamers of lace behind him.

Vic shouted and the joyous

sound echoed and dwindled through the high reaches. Vic arched his body. The tiny whirling ball of Earth was below. He folded his wings and hurtled down, air flowing about him, tearing at his hair, blurring his eyes.

Laughing, Vic slowly opened his wings to brake the plummet.

His wings were arms; and now he was twisting and turning and tumbling, the thin and futile arms flailing and slicing.

Vic screamed. The earth rushed toward him, huge and corrugated. Vic hurtled on, end over end, screaming. His mouth filled with air, driving back into his skull. He screamed silently, falling. . . .

Vic woke. His heart thundered in his chest. He was sitting on the edge of the damp bed, gasping. *Quiet,* he told himself, *Quiet.* You're lucky. You're lucky. If you hadn't wakened before you hit, you would have died. You'd be dead. You're lucky. His breathing raggedly became deeper, and he mopped his face with a corner of the sheet.

Suddenly, he giggled. "Nonsense," he said aloud. "I'm worse than an old woman. Just a dream."

Yet, his mind said, but that tearing, thudding, pounding heart was no dream. How much of that could a man stand? Maybe those old folk sayings had meaning. *If you dream you are falling and don't wake before you hit, you will never wake.* How the hell did you check a statement like that? People did die in their sleep.

What was it his friend had said? "You could believe yourself to death?"

His friend? Roy Carlton had said it. His friend. That story about "bleeding" a guy to death in Brazil.

Roy and Frank were going to skip. Today. Tomorrow. Vic had to move. Now. Like he knew what he was doing.

Which he didn't.

Death without reasonable explanation. That was the kind of stuff Roy was talking about. Those natives in Brazil believing themselves to death. What was that voodoo cult? Like a drum beat. Several of the pilots on the Natal—Dakar run had seen the rituals. Drums, chants, girls twisting and humping on the ground. Spirit voices. Letting blood from the cut throat of a goat run into a bowl.

All right, he thought, be an investigator. Look it up. But Colonel Sloan wasn't any black primitive.

He looked at his watch. Eight P.M. He'd call Consuela at the University of Arizona Library; she could set things up for him at the reference room. Medical discussions of what—death by suggestion?

How about the liquor? How about Amado? How about Roy and Frank? How about Colonel Bello? Were bar-keeps beginning to throw the name Victor Jennings around the base? Bello wouldn't

be at his office at eight in the evening.

One thing at a time. The library closed at ten. Better to do the wrong thing than nothing at all.

He walked into the living room and reached into the telephone alcove.

CHAPTER X

The tall windows of the reference room opened to the desert night. Vic shoved his notes aside. The name of the Brazilian cult was *Macumba.* Newspaper articles about it were wide-eyed tourist inanities. The sociology journals spoke of a syncretic religion compounded of Catholicism and paganism. An Afro-Brazilian phenomenon centered about Rio De Janeiro. All of which was of no relevance.

Vic turned his wrist. Nine P.M. the high-ceilinged room was deserted except for the woman at the reference desk. *Miss Dace,* the name plate read. He took the articles to the desk. "Miss Dace," he said. "I think what I need are medical and psychological discussions on this kind of thing."

Miss Dace laughed. A pair of gray-rimmed glasses hung from a beaded Indian strap around her neck. "Consuela said 'voodoo stuff.' You say 'this kind of thing.' Doesn't anyone have any mercy on reference librarians?"

"Trouble is," Vic said, "I won't know what I'm looking for until I find it."

The grey-haired woman pushed two volumes toward him. "I've been trying," she said. "These are about unexplained deaths. Perhaps they're closer to what you want."

"Miss Dace," Vic said. "If only I knew what I want. I'm sorry to put you to all this bother."

"Don't be," Miss Dace said. "I'm glad to do Consuela a favor. And it's my job. You read those, I'll have some more for you."

An account of migrant Mexican workers suddenly dying was of no help. "Nightmare Death!"—the exclamation mark should have warned him how profound the discussion was going to be.

"Bangangut Death" told of sudden deaths among Filipino peasants. No dice.

Vic opened a volume of bound periodicals. Issues of the *American Anthropologist.* Miss Dace's card read " 'Voodoo Death', 44:2, 1942." The writing sounded meaningful. He took words like *parasympathetic* and *sympathicoadrenal* to the nearby dictionary on a stand. He closed the article slowly, making notes on a pad. He closed the volume, and organized the notes on a 2″ x 4″ file card:

> "Voodoo Death," *American Anthropologist,* 44:2, 1942. Author laments that, to his knowledge, no autopsy has been made on victim of voodoo death. Author speculates that victim would

demonstrate following symptoms: rapid breathing, rapid pulse, hemoconcentration from loss of flood fluids to the tissues. Heart would beat faster and faster until it reached state of constant contraction. Result: Death in systole.

Well, Vic thought, I'm doing something. I ought to quit. I have to do something, so I'm doing something. Something futile and meaningless. Just something. I ought to have at least enough self-respect to do nothing, rather than flounder like a drowning rat.

Vic made notes from the next article.

"Sudden and Unexpected Deaths of Young Soldiers," *The Archives of Pathology,* Vol. 42. Death following routine medical injections. Death after doses of poison too small to cause death. Deaths while eating; while exercising; while sleeping. Autopsy revealed, in many cases, heart failure, intercranial hemorrhage, meninogoccemia. – However, causes of many deaths not revealable by autopsy. It must be made clear that the methods of the pathologist are frequently inadequate to disclose either the extent or the nature of the disorders even though they are severe enough to be incompatible with life.

"'. . . inadequate to disclose either the extent or nature . . .'" Vic said aloud. "Colonel Sloan's autopsy report. This must be a stock phrase."

He saw Miss Dace looking at him.

So what if it was a stock phrase? It meant that sudden, unexplained death was pretty damn frequent, that's what. It meant that pathologists didn't know why a person died in lots of cases. It meant that pathologists often didn't know what was a matter of natural death and what was not. That left a pretty large area in which a murderer could help his victim die. An area the pathologist could cover only with jargon—like "Unexplained vasomotor phenomenon," maybe?

Miss Dace was beckoning him. He brought the volumes to her.

"Are you finished with those?" she said.

"Yes, I am, Miss Dace."

"It's ten 'clock," she said. "And we have to close. Here's a journal that may help you. It's not supposed to circulate, but I'll give you a special overnight permit"—she looked up and smiled—"because you are a friend of Consuela's. Will you be sure to return it tomorrow morning?"

The volume was lettered in blue: *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine.*

"Miss Dace," Vic said. "I'll be on the steps when the library opens in the morning. I'm grateful to you—and to Consuela."

He drove back to the rented house in Cortaro. The air conditioner still refused to operate. He

opened the windows wide to admit the evening breeze. He measured ground coffee into the percolator and turned on the burner. He undressed and stood in the shower, bowing his head to catch the water spray full force on the nape of the neck.

He dressed and carried a cup of steaming black coffee to the desk. The library volume lay on the blotter.

Miss Dace had inserted a perforated call-card to mark the article. The title: "The Phenomenon of Sudden Death in Animals and Man." I don't trust that article already, Vic thought. He's supposed to be a scholar: that title has got to be either "Animal and Man" or "Animals and Men." Not "Animals and Man." I don't know much, but I know that much. At least I know that much.

The author referred to the article on voodoo death that had appeared in the *American Anthropologist.*

Vic looked at his file cards. "Voodoo Death," *American Anthropologist,* 44:2, 1942. He had it. All right.

The *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine* man disagreed with *American Anthropologist* man. The AA man speculated that voodoo death was caused by fear: that the heart beat faster and faster until it was in a state of constant contraction; death in systole resulting.

No, the psychosomatic man said. Voodoo death, in his opinion, resulted from an over-stimulation of the parasympathetic system.

There we go again, Vic thought. He consulted his cards.

> *Parasympathetic*: refers to a part of the autonomic nervous system. Composed of one group of nerves arising in cranial region and one group arising in sacral region, the parasympathetic system constricts pupils, dilates blood vessels, slows the heart, increases activity of glands and digestive and reproductive organs.

The psychosomatic man agreed that the first reaction to a voodoo stimulus was increased heartbeat. But, he said, the second reaction was opposed; it became something other than a flight-or-fight response. The heartbeat slowed until death occurred in diastole.

"Aha!" Vic said. "Death does not occur in systole; it occurs in diastole. So what?"

The article went on: the direct cause of death, therefore, was not *fear,* but *hopelessness.* Complete, fulfilled, consumnated hopelessness.

The writer called this phenomenon "Vagus Death." He first noticed it while transferring a wild rat from one cage to another. The rat fell into a large jar of water. The rat struggled a few seconds and died. The writer, curious about the quick death, examined the rat's organs. Death was not from drowning.

He dropped other wild rats into

the water. A pattern was repeated: First, fright response; then, cessation of struggle; finally, death within seconds. Devices to measure gland, heart, and brain activity recorded the rat responses. These records, the writer believed, gave considerable substance to his theory: *A belief that death is inevitable can induce death.* This theory was consonant, the writer said, with case histories of sudden death following injections, sudden immersions, nightmares, the sight of one's own blood, and other experiences. Voodoo victims followed a pattern resembling that of the wild rats. Natives did not die of fright, which passed in a relatively short time. Once they believed completely in the hopelessness of their condition, they quietly deteriorated and died.

All right, Vic thought. Good. Now, how could you make Colonel Sloan so hopeless that he would just quietly die for you? How could Roy do it? How could Frank do it?

Colonel Sloan was no Haitian, or Afro-Brazilian, either. Nor was he a wild rat in water.

Vic shoved his chair back and went into the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee. The pale desert night hung whitely beyond the window. Colonel Sloan was an intelligent, educated, sophisticated man. He was not a black primitive. Roy Carlton was an airplane jockey. He was not a voodoo *papa,* or an African witch doctor—or even a psychosomatic scientist. And Vic Jennings was a goddam fool playing his little desperate games.

Vic Jennings ought to be an expert on hopelessness. The coffee was good—hot and strong and aromatic. Thank God for coffee. And salami sandwiches. And fat-popping broiled steaks. And first, and last, and in between: Consuela.

Well, if he died, he wasn't about to die from hopelessness. It was strange, though. Strong men faced up to trouble, fought, failed, and died. But lots of trouble couldn't do any more to Vic than a little bit of trouble did. Trouble made him sick—promptly, in the stomach, in the heart, in the head. But it never made him hopeless. Maybe weakness was strength?

Believe it, Vic thought, if it makes you any happier. He put the cup into the sink. The fact still is that as far as the army and Arizona are concerned you're suspected of fraud, theft, murder. The question is: What happened to Colonel Sloan?

He went to the desk and opened the volume again. He had underlined a passage with light pencil strokes. "Most animals have an innate fear of falling. Perhaps the fall as much as the immersion contributed to the hopelessness in rats."

That's why they invented parachutes, Vic thought. First thing in the morning, I'll look over Roy's report again. There must be something. Maybe I'd die before I hit the

ground if my chute didn't open. But Colonel Sloan's chute did open.

And I've got a phone call to make too.

The silver desert night was turning yellow and orange. Dawn was coming. Vic went into the bedroom and lay on the wrinkled sheets. His leg jerked and he was asleep.

Vic awoke, ate breakfast, and drove to the base. The sun had emerged above the mountains. BT-13's were trundling to the taxi strips. The air was clean and cool.

In Colonel Bello's outer office the WAC sergeant brewed coffee on a hotplate.

"Hello, Sergeant," Vic said. "I want to see the colonel. Is he in yet? Gosh, you're pretty."

"He's not here, Lieutenant." the girl said. "And I'm glad to see you chipper again. He took off at dawn for San Antone. Be back late tonight or early tomorrow."

"Lovely Amazon," Vic said. "I have to see that report on the Colonel Sloan crash. Could you work it for me?"

"Lieutenant," the girl said, "you do feel good, don't you? Here, take a cup of coffee to your desk and I'll bring you the folder. It's in a locked file in the Colonel's office."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Vic said. "I'll be in your debt." He took the steaming fragrant coffee through the nearly empty administration section. He sat back in the swivel chair, sipped from the cup, and stared at the phone. He pulled the chair to the desk and dialed the operator.

"Miss," he said quietly, his lips near the mouthpiece, "I want to make a person-to-person call to the Superintendent, Department of Liquor Licenses and Control, State House, Phoenix."

He heard the Phoenix switchboard answer. Then he heard a buzz. He heard a distant voice say "It's a person-to-person for you, Mr. Bishop."

"Hello," the phone said loudly. "Bishop speaking."

"Mr. Bishop," Vic said in a low voice. "My name is Victor Jennings, Personnel Officer at Hoffman Army Air Field. I want to report a large bootleg deal near Tucson."

"Mr. Jennings?" the phone said. "You'll have to speak up. I can't hear you."

"Yes, Sir," Vic said. He repeated his statement.

"Give me the details, please," the phone said.

Vic told Mr. Bishop all that he knew. "I'm specially concerned," Vic said, "because they are criminally using my name, Lieutenant Victor Jennings."

"Yes, Lieutenant," the phone said. "Are you sure that it is a bootleg operation—that is, the sale of liquor for which no tax has been paid—rather than the licensed sale of legal liquor?"

"Yes, Sir," Vic said. "I tasted it."

"All right," the phone said. "I can call in a federal agency, the alcohol and tobacco tax unit of the Treasury. Your report will get immediate action, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Sir," Vic said.

"Lieutenant," the voice added gently. "We have offices all over the state. Perhaps you'd find our Tucson office near you more convenient next time?"

"Oh," Vic said.

"It would facilitate matters both for you and for us, Lieutenant. And, I'm sure you'll understand, it's a more conventional arrangement."

"Proper channels?" Vic said.

"Exactly," the phone said. "Thank you, Lieutenant. The Tucson office will call you soon. Goodbye."

Vic laid the phone in its cradle. He sat, head bowed, hand resting on the black instrument. "Well," he said. "Anyhow. One way or another, it's done."

The WAC sergeant marched across the room, her heels loud. She put the black folder on his desk and her hands on her hips and said, "How's that for service?"

He stood and gravely kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm not that ugly," the girl said. She was short and robust, had a generous bosom and comfortable hips; her hair was long and mildly blonde. Across her cheeks and snub nose drifted a dust of freckles.

"No, you're not," Vic said. "Would you care to comfort me in my season of woe?"

"Lieutenant," the sergeant said, "You must believe what evil people say about us WAC's. Coffee, yes; comfort, no." She took the cup. "See you, Lieutenant."

"Thanks again, Sergeant," Vic said. "I'll drop the folder off in a few minutes."

He put the folder on the slide-out shelf. He unfolded and spread out on the desk an Arizona road map. Working closely with documents from the folder, he marked and identified on the chart the positions where parts of the wrecked plane had been found and the areas where the three men had landed.

He read the autopsy report and added notes on 2 x 4 cards to his rubber-banded packet. He folded the map to expose the marked areas and slipped it under the spring of his clip board.

He rose. "Check-out," he said. "Notes: in shirt-pocket. Map: on clipboard. Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine: to be returned to library. Bello's folder: to be returned to sergeant. Magnifying glass? Double-billed cap? Morphine hypodermic? Or is it opium? Or cocaine? The hell with it."

On the way out, he gave the sergeant the black folder.

He parked in Tucson to drop the book into the *Return* receptacle.

Minutes later, he was on highway 80, driving toward Benson.

Heat shimmered over the desert. Vic pulled his cap visor low over his forehead. "I ought to wear those air-force sun glasses," he said aloud. "And be a real wild-blue-yonder air force officer. With a silk scarf. Like Roy."

He turned left in Benson and entered highway 86. Past the town of Cochise, the range began to open into grassland. He turned right onto a dirt road. Ahead, in the rising Dragoon Mountains, lay Stronghold Canyon.

The dirt road ended. A narrow climbing trail led through the brush. Vic parked the car and propped the clipboard against the steering wheel. The impact areas were circled on the map.

CHAPTER XI

Frank, dark-skinned, head hunched into shoulders, stared at Sandra. "You meant it," he said. "You love me. You'll go away with me. You meant it?"

"Frank," Sandra said, "Come into the apartment. We can't talk here, honey."

She led Frank into the living room and turned around.

"I do love you," she said. "If we had money, I'd go anywhere with you."

He touched her cheek. "Sandra. We can do it. The deal is completed and I get my share tonight. We can do it, Sandra."

"Do it?" Sandra said.

He pulled her close. "I have a seven-day leave in my pocket. I get at least $50,000 tonight. Meet me in Los Angeles tomorrow and we'll disappear. We'll go to Acapulco and get married." He bent to kiss her hair. "Sandra," he said, "I love you."

"You'll desert, Frank?" Sandra's voice was muffled. "Im scared."

"Not exactly *desert,* honey," Frank said softly. "Just disappear. Darling, since I met you, I've had ideas of my own." He held her away and looked into her face. "For the first time, ideas of my own!"

"I don't understand," Sandra said.

"I'll tell you," Frank said. "I've lots to tell you when we're together for good. I'll tell you then."

Sandra shivered in his arms. "It's about you and Roy, isn't it?"

Frank held her tightly. "Yes. You'll meet me tomorrow in L.A.? I'll put $50,000—more!—in your lap."

"Frank," she said. "I'm so scared."

"Don't be scared," Frank said. "Don't be scared. Just meet me."

"I'll catch a plane out of Municipal tonight," she said. "We—I have a cottage at Laguna. Shall we meet there instead of L.A.?"

"Good," Frank said. "After I get the money tonight, I'll head west." He paused. "Poor Frank will go west."

"How?" Sandra said.

"Don't worry, honey, I'll be there. Where's the cottage?"

"1002 Table Rock Road," she said faintly.

"You love me?" Frank said.

"Oh, yes, darling," Sandra said. "I do. I do love you."

"You want to be with me?"

Sandra sat on the low bench. "Darling, I do."

Frank laughed. His face relaxed. "I gave my destination as Hollywood. My uncle is very sick there. He's a piano tuner. I found the name in a phone book and got an emergency leave. Roy's not the only operator, is he, honey?"

Sandra smiled weakly. "Frank?" she said.

"What, Honey?"

"Does Roy know about all this?"

"I'll meet you tomorrow, your cottage, 1002 Table Rock Road, Laguna Beach, right?" Frank said.

"Please, Frank, does Roy know?"

"Forget Roy," Frank said.

CHAPTER XII

The M.P. at the gate house saluted Roy and Frank. He held out a clip board and pencil.

Frank signed.

"Hot enough for you tonight?" Roy said to the soldier. Frank returned the clip board.

"Sure is, sir," the M.P. said. He held the board out to Roy.

"I don't need it," Roy said. "I'll be right back. I'm on solo flight tonight. Just going to have a goodbye drink with my friend. He's going on leave."

"Sorry, sir. Colonel Bello's orders. Everybody signs out and in."

"O.K., son," Roy said. He signed his name. Under *leaving,* he wrote *8:30 P.M.* Under *returning* he wrote *9:00 P.M.* Under *destination,* he wrote *Red Rock Saloon.* "Just to walk across the road and back?"

"Yes, sir," the M.P. said. "Colonel Bello's orders."

"All right," Roy said. "I'll bring you a beer."

The soldier laughed, saluted, threw the board on a shelf, and sat on a stool.

The two men walked across the dark field. Overhead, stars flickered in the vast night sky. The ground was uneven and rocky. Frank stumbled.

"Think we'll miss the desert, Roy?" he said.

Roy patted his waist. The fat money belt bulged under the tight shirt. "I'll manage to bear it," he said.

Frank peered through the night. "How much do you have in there?" he said.

"What the hell do you mean?" Roy said. "I have as much as you do in yours. Fifty thousand dollars."

"Not more?" Frank said.

"So what if it is more?" Roy said. "You complaining?"

"No," Frank said.

The Red Rock Saloon was a low, brown-painted adobe building. A

round, smiling Italian wiped off tables. Two enlisted men drank at the bar.

"Lootennas," the rotund Italian said. He draped the bar rag over his arm and bowed. "Permitta me. For you, the best table inna house!" He led them to a table by the window, pulled out the chairs, slapped the seats with the dirty rag.

"Thank you, Sam," Roy said. "You're the best maitre-de in the west."

Sam smiled broadly. "Whisky, gennelmen? Beer? Mixed drinks? Wine?"

"Beer," Frank said.

"Right away, gennelman," Sam left.

"Frank," Roy said, pulling up his chair. "You notice, the wind's in the east?"

"Yeah," Frank said.

"That means I'll be taking off from the west end of the field."

"So?"

"I'll be on the far end of Runway One. I'll be there five, ten minutes, making a cockpit check."

"Sure," Frank said. "What's this: basic training?"

"No," Roy said. "I could take on an unauthorized passenger out there in the dark."

"Oh," Frank said.

"Frank," Roy said. "You slip over to the far runway where I have to turn the plane and climb aboard. Nobody'll see."

Frank looked at Roy. "Why?"

"I have to land at March before I start the return run. You can pop out and catch a bus from San Berdu to L.A. That's where you said you were going, didn't you?"

"Did I?" Frank said.

"Hell, I thought it would save you trouble. You don't want to, don't."

"I'll tell you something funny," Frank said. "I was going to ask you to take me. Where are you going to ditch the plane?"

"In the mountains on the way back. Planes have crashed there and not been found for years. I'll bail out into the night and disappear."

"And me?" Frank said.

"You have a seven-day head start." Roy said.

"Will we meet somewhere?"

"Why?" Roy said. "We won't need each other again. Each of us is a rich man."

"You know something funny, Roy?" Frank said. "I was going to ask you to take me to March Field."

"Yes?" Roy said. "Then I'll wait on the runway for you?"

"Yeah," Frank said.

A man burst in the swinging doors and looked wildly about.

"We've got company," Roy said. "Leave it to me. Stay steady."

Vic Jennings stared a moment at the two officers, breathed deeply, and walked slowly toward the table. The neck of a small blue laundry bag was twisted in his hand.

"Welcome, Vic," Roy said.

"I saw your names in the sign-out register," Vic said. "I saw them. You guys are leaving now, aren't you? You're running out."

"Running out?" Roy said. "I got a routine solo to make tonight."

"Yeah. Yeah," Vic said. "And he"—Vic jerked his head toward Frank—"signed out on leave."

"That's right," Roy said, smiling.

"Let me buy a drink, Vic said. "Sam! Sam! Bring us some of that cheap government booze!"

Frank looked quickly at Roy. The fat Italian ran to the table.

"Whatta you talk? Sam said. "Gov'mint booze? I got license."

"Sam, Sam," Vic said. "You didn't get in on that deal? Every other barkeep in town got lots and lots of whisky. Cheap. From Lieutenant Jennings at the base. Surplus government stock. Lots of it."

"But Lootenna," Sam said. "You're Lootenna Jennings."

"Get out of here, Sam," Roy said. Sam went behind the bar and stared across the room at the officers. The two enlisted men left the saloon.

"All right, Vic," Roy said. "What do you want?" He looked up at Frank and said, "Sit down!"

Frank sat.

Vic put the laundry bag on the table. "You two aren't going anywhere. Treasury Department men and Arizona State Police are probably waiting on the field for you now."

He sat on a chair.

"Yes?" Roy said. "You found out about the liquor?"

"And more," Vic said quietly. "Enough to send you to the chair."

"For what," Roy said. "Killing you?"

Vic said, "You might as well kill me." He up-ended the laundry bag and spread out a fifty-foot length of nylon rope, two short pieces of rope, and a knotted silk scarf. Roy's face was pale.

"What the hell's that?" Frank said. "Your laundry?"

"Evidence of murder," Vic said. "I found that buried in Stronghold Canyon. I know how Colonel Sloan was murdered."

Frank looked at Roy. "What the hell's this? I was in the cockpit."

Roy was silent.

"Listen quietly, gentlemen," Vic said. "Two short pieces of rope. To tie Colonel Sloan's hands. Blood stained from Colonel Sloan's wrists. These ropes caused the marks on his wrists—the marks the autopsy reports says came from the shroud lines. All right?"

Roy stared at Vic.

"The scarf," Vic said. "To blindfold the poor old bastard. So that he couldn't see what you were doing and would believe what you were saying. Like your friend in Brazil, Roy."

Roy folded his hands on the table top and smiled. Frank stared at the two men.

"Now the old man's blind and helpless. Now you tell him every-

thing. You tell him why you can't let him live. You tell him you're going to throw him out the cargo hatch. With his hands tied so he can't pull the ripcord. He's going to spatter on the mountain side. Calmly, quietly, surely, you tell him."

Roy laughed. "Colonel Sloan floated down under full canopy, Vic."

"Yes, he did, Roy," Vic said. "But he fell at least a thousand feet, didn't he?, before the chute opened. Last item: the fifty-foot rope. You pushed him out all right, but you stepped out with him. With one end of this rope tied to your belt and the other end tied to his ripcord. A two- or three-minute free fall for you. He's convinced he's been murdered; he struggles to free his wrists, the ropes sawing into the flesh. Then he gave up. You open your chute; the line pays out and opens his chute. You untie your end. The Colonel floats down a dead man."

"I'm quite a scientist," Roy said. "Or a psychologist. How the hell can I be sure that he'll die?"

"You don't have to be sure," Vic said. "You've got a second best ready to put into action. If he's alive when you land, you crush his head with a rock. A bad jump, that's all. He hit wrong when he landed. It's murder, Roy; a good, legal, hanging jury murder, Roy."

Frank stood, his thighs striking the table. "Roy, tell him I knew nothing about it! I was in the cockpit! I jumped miles later! Tell him!"

Vic tumbled his chair back, turning to meet Frank. Roy broke a beer bottle on Vic's head; jagged glass sliced his cheek.

Vic fell and lay, his face sidewise on the floor, blood welling.

Roy stepped near and snapped a short vicious kick at Vic's head. Frank's eyes were wide.

"He'll sleep," Roy said. "Let's get to the plane." He stuffed the rope and scarf into the laundry bag, grabbed Frank's arm and started for the door.

He stopped at the bar. "Sam," he said. "Here's a ten-dollar bill to cover damages. Vic'll be all right, Sam. Just a misunderstanding. You take care of him. Keep him here. He and I will straighten it out later. No sweat, Sam?"

Sam swallowed. "Yes, Sir. I fix him up. You no kill him? I take care of him hees nice guy. You no kill him?"

Roy laughed. "Just a misunderstanding Sam. Right?"

"All right," Sam said, "all right."

Roy pulled the wide-eyed Frank through the swinging doors.

CHAPTER XIII

"Army 703 to tower. Request take-off instructions. Over."

"Tower to Army 703. Take-off: runway Zero Niner, wind velocity southeast five knots. Over."

"703 to tower. Roger. Out."

Roy edged the throbbng AT-11 forward off the apron and into the zig-zag pattern toward the dimly lit west end of the field.

The ship began to skitter and Roy held the drift. "No hurry," he murmured. The port engine coughed and steadied. He let the ship roll faster. At the end of the runway, he wheeled the craft around into the gentle east wind.

He throttled down the engines, rose, worked his way to the waist, opened the hatch, and worked swiftly forward. Behind him, Frank clambered aboard, shut and bolted the hatch, and strapped himself into a seat.

Roy stood on the brakes and opened the throttle, watching the instrument dials swing. The engines roared; the fuselage shuddered. "703 to tower. 703 to tower. Ready for take-off."

"Tower to 703. Cleared for take-off. All alone. No sweat." The green light flashed.

Roy relaxed on the brakes and the AT-11 started forward, rolling faster and faster. The ship left the ground in an easy lift that pressed Roy against the seat.

Levelling high above the earth, Roy leaned back and waved Frank forward. Frank slipped into the co-pilot seat.

"There we are, Frank," Roy shouted. "Army 703; Lieutenant Roy Carlton, pilot; routine training solo flight to March Field."

Frank leaned close. "How'd you clear so fast?"

Roy laughed. "I filed the flight forms and checked the weather before we went for the beer. I'm always ready to leave *now*."

"Damn good thing," Frank said. "I thought Jennings would get there in time to stop the flight."

"No," Roy said. "I put him to sleep for a good half hour."

"Maybe for good?" Frank yelled.

"Maybe," Roy said. "Who cares? We're not coming back, are we?"

Frank shook his head.

"Relax," Roy said. "Vic hasn't changed our plans, has he?"

Frank turned. "You can't land at March. The alarm will be out by then."

"No sweat," Roy said. "You'll ditch with me. That's all."

Frank slumped in the seat.

Roy pointed at the navigation chart and then at the cockpit floor. The panel lights were bright in the thin blue night air. "Check position."

Frank leaned forward and took the mapboard. The plane was at 9,000 feet, somewhere west of Ajo, between the Growler Mountains and the Sierra Pinta.

Roy smiled at Frank's bent head and reached down to touch the .45 automatic he had placed under the seat.

CHAPTER XIV

Vic was awake. Weight pressed

against his face. He opened his lids and his eyes were heavy and white and blind. Liquid ran from his sockets.

Vic screamed.

The wet bar cloth was whipped away and Sam's face appeared. "Shoo, Lootenna, you all ri'; you all ri', Lootenna." A heavy arm slipped under Vic's head and lifted.

"Oh," Vic said. "Sam, it's you."

"Shoo, Lootenna," Sam said, "You been hit, but you all ri'." He wiped Vic's face with a dry cloth. He mopped Vic's eyes.

Vic sobbed.

"You all ri'," Sam said. "Please, Lootenna, believe old Sam, you all ri'."

"I'm all right," Vic said, pushing up on his elbows. "I thought I was blind." He shoved Sam away. "Jesus, my head, my head!"

Sam helped him to rise.

"I was cold-cocked, huh, Sam?" Vic said weakly.

"He bust a beer bottle on the old *cabeza,* Lootenna," Sam said.

Vic steadied himself against a table. "Where'd the bastards go?"

"They say gotta get to the plane."

Vic sat in a chair. He wiped a hand across his eyes. "Some hero, eh, Sam?"

Sam poured a shot of whisky and brought it to the table. "You a man, Lootenna," he said. "You don' have to be hero. Drink. It help." Sam went to the bar and brought out a box. He cut and folded lengths of gauze, poured orange iodine on the pads, and cut off strips of adhesive tape.

"Come here, Lootenna."

Vic finished the drink, shuddered, and walked unsteadily to the bar. Sam taped the bandages over the cuts on Vic's head and cheek.

"Jesus," Vic said.

"You O.K. now? You go to doctor?"

"O.K., Sam. Thanks. Thanks." Vic walked stiffly to the door and out into the dark rocky field. His head ached. His hands floated back and forth by his sides. "Got to stop them," he said. He told his legs to walk faster, but they lifted and fell mechanically. His hands floated. His legs lifted. "Got ot stop them," he said. "Roy Carlton. Frank Blackford. Colonel Bello. Consuela. Colonel Sloan. Vagus death. Floating dead. Floating and dead."

The M.P. at the gate said, "What's wrong, Lieutenant?"

"Tell Operations," Vic said. "Stop Carlton. Stop plane." His lips moved with no sound. His voice suddenly blared, "I want to see Bello!"

Off in the night, a plane started its run, engines growing to a roar. Winking lights mounted and swept through air toward the gate shack.

Through the engine clamor, Vic fell, lightsome, down and down, feathery, side-slipping gently, down and down.

He awoke on a clean white cot. A medic was forcing his mouth open, pressing against his chin.

Bitter fluid splashed and Vic swallowed convulsively. He hit the medic in the chest.

"That's enough," a cool, unhurried voice said. "Jennings, can you talk?" The medic piled pillows under Vic's head.

"Yes, Colonel Bello," Vic said.

The colonel nodded toward a small, thick-set man in a brown suit. "This is Mr. Kamm, of the Arizona Liquor License and Control Board." He turned toward another man, a burly close-cropped blond. "And this is Mr. Wasnavage, of the Treasury Department. They came to me about your phone call."

"Did you get them?" Vic said.

"Slow down," Colonel Bello said. "What put you in this shape?"

"Carlton and Blackford slugged me in the Red Rock Saloon."

"Why the hell don't you stay away from whisky?" the colonel said. "How did you find out about the liquor deal?"

"I had a drink in Rillito," Vic said. "The bartender said he bought surplus whisky from Hoffman Army Air Field. I knew that couldn't be true. It turned out that somebody had impersonated me and sold the whisky. It had to be Roy Carlton, and it had to be bootleg."

"It's moonshine, right enough," Mr. Wasnavage said. "The biggest operation Arizona's seen in ten years. We picked up a truck driver. We want the organizers."

"Roy Carlton and Frank Blackford," Vic said, "the buyers will identify them."

Colonel Bello turned to the sergeant-major behind him. "Have Carlton and Blackford picked up at once."

"Too late," Vic said.

"Why?"

"Roy took off on a night solo flight right after he knocked me out."

"Then get Blackford."

"Blackford has a leave. Maybe he went with Roy."

"Impossible," Colonel Bello said. "Carlton has to check out solo." He went to the phone and dialed Operations.

"Colonel Bello here. Who went out on that last AT-11?"

He listened.

"Who saw him?"

He paused.

"Did anybody else board that plane?"

He waited.

"Nobody. All right. He did? An hour before? You let an officer file flight forms an *hour* before he is to take off? I'll see you in the morning about that, mister." He hung up.

"This base must have collected every incompetent in the Air Force," he said. "Jennings, the operations officer saw one man board the plane alone. He assumes it was Carlton. So they can't both be on that plane. You got more ideas?"

"Excuse me," Mr. Kamm said.

"But we've got to find the still; that's even more important than getting the organizers."

"They bought it," Vic said. "From a Meixcan named Amado. He's got a cantina in Nogales."

"Where in Nogales?" the state man said. "What's his full name?"

"That's all I know." Vic closed his eyes. "Except that Carlton and Blackford—at least Carlton—murdered Colonel Sloan."

"All right," Colonel Bello said. "Let's have that complete."

Vic did not open his eyes.

"I spent the afternoon in Stronghold Canyon, where Carlton and the Colonel landed. I found pieces of rope and a scarf."

"What does that mean?" Colonel Bello said.

Vic told him. *The Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine.* Roy's account of the man in Brazil. The confrontation in the Red Rock Saloon. "Frank said Roy did it. Sam, the owner, heard him."

"My God," the swarthy officer said. "What a story."

The sergeant major entered the room. "Lieutenant Blackford left this evening on emergency leave, sick uncle in Hollywood. He checked out at the gate."

"Send out a general alarm," Colonel Bello said. "Wire Blackford's destination his leave is canceled, return immediately. Notify M.P.'s in Hollywood to arrest him. Notify all air fields within range to impound the AT-11 and arrest Carlton."

He turned to Vic. "You stay here in the dispensary until morning. Get the doctor to examine you thoroughly. Meanwhile I'll check your story. It's too wild to be true." He put a hand on Vic's shoulder. "On the other hand, it's too wild to dream up. It must be true."

Vic spoke, drowsily. "Colonel, I did dream it. That's exactly what I did." The hand patted his shoulder.

Vic slept.

CHAPTER XV

On duty in the control tower of March Army Air Field, Sergeant Paul Wade of Charleston, South Carolina, and Corporal Cipriano Briacone, of Rye, New York slouched in their seats before the phones.

"Now all we got to do," Wade said, "for the rest of the gawd damned night is sit and wey-yit."

"Yeah," Briacone said. "Drive you crazy. They oughta let us play cards or something. Or put a blonde in here or something."

"Aw, Slippery, what would you do with a blonde?" Wade said. "You ain't even old enough to get it up, butter ball."

"Yeah? Yeah?" Briacone said. "Last time I was in San Berdu, I met a girl. . . ."

"Ah know," Wade said, "ah *know*. She picked you up in her Cadillac convertible with white-sidewall tires and took you to her apartment and changed into a

clingin' negligee with her soft white tits just a-hangin' out, and she begged you to. . . ."

The loudspeaker hissed and crackled: "March Tower! March Tower! This is Army 703. May day! May day! Do you read me, March Tower?"

Sergeant Wade seized the phone. "Army 703, Army 703, this is March Tower. I read you loud and clear."

Corporal Briacone pushed the button. In the lounge below, the officer in charge and members of the emergency crew ran to the stairs.

"March Tower, this is 703 on a May day. I'm going in. Too low to ditch. Take a message."

"Army 703: What is your location?"

"The hell with the location! Get this message down!"

"I must have your location, 703."

"All right, all right. Twenty-three miles north-east Banning; heading 270 degrees. Altimeter out. Too low to jump. Mountains ahead. Left engine's gone; right engine spitting and flaming. *Now take this message!*"

"Wilco, 703," Wade said. He spun a pad and poised his pencil.

"This is First Lieutenant Frank Blackford en route from Hoffman to March. Lieutenant Roy Carlton tricked me into substituting for him on his scheduled night solo. He is deserting. He has a ride to Mitchel Field from El Paso. He jimmied the engines on this plane. He tricked me. He tricked me. He murdered Colonel Sloan. Repeat. Roy Carlton murdered Colonel Sloan. Vic Jennings knows truth. Carlton cheated me out of liquor deal money. Call Colonel Bello at Hoffman. Get Roy. Get the son-of-a-bitch!"

The loud speaker was silent.

"703?" Wade said.

The officer in charge picked up the direct phone and called Air Rescue.

"Army 703," Wade said. "Come in!"

A helicopter out on the field growled and began to flutter its blades. A ground crew rolled out an L-5 rescue plane.

"Please come in, Army 703!" Wade said.

Ten minutes later, Briacone said, "Put that phone down, mush-mouth. You know he ain't gonna answer."

Wade sat back. "Yeah, guess you're raht, Slippery. He must be long gone now."

"Nice clear night for a fire," Briacone said. "Rescue won't have any trouble locating wreckage."

"Yeah," Wade said. He stared at the phone. He leaned back and stared at the loudspeaker on the wall. "You know something, Slippery, they's the only girl we evah see."

"Where?" Briacone said. "Who?"

"Old May," Wade said. "Old cotton-pickin', ever-lovin' May Day, herself."

CHAPTER XVI

Dawn was thin and grey in the antiseptic room. Vic watched the wall opposite his bed grow light. He belched and acrid fluid bubbled in his throat. He felt the swelling on his head. Muscles pulled tight in his face.

The door opened quietly. Colonel Bello, uniform rumpled, walked in and sat.

"Jennings?" he said.

"Yes, sir," Vic said.

"Blackford's dead."

"Yes, sir."

"You all right?" Colonel Bello said.

"Yes, sir."

Listen, then. This is a transcript of an informal preliminary report phoned in by Captain Frank F. Killian, Mortuary Officer, March Army Air Force Base. Got that?"

"Another mortuary officer," Vic said. "I didn't used to know there was such a god damn thing."

"Listen," the dark, rumpled Colonel said. "This is what he says. 'An AT-11 crashed in the foothills of the San Jacinto mountains near Banning, California, at approximately 0100 hours, killing the pilot. Notified of the crash, I immediately proceeded to scene to supervise recovery and subsequent identification and preservation of body. The remains were charred and mangled with multiple comminuted fractures throughout skeletal framework. Cranium was collapsed and eviscerated. Trouser remnant yielded wallet with driver's license, officer's club card, and miscellaneous items all bearing the name Frank E. Blackford. Identification tags on jacket pocket were imprinted Frank E. Blackford. Am reconstructing dental pattern from dental anatomy present. Request you send dental record of deceased for comparison.' "

Colonel Bello threw the sheet of paper on the bed and leaned back in the visitor's chair. He covered his eyes with a hand.

"What the hell sense does that make?" Vic said. He swung his legs gingerly over the side of the bed.

"Yes," Colonel Bello said dully. "What sense does that make?"

Vic bent to find his shoes and pain battered his head. "Christ," he said, and stood. The floor was cool.

The colonel pulled a folded sheet from his breast pocket. "Here," he said. "Another report for you to read. A transcript of the radio conversation between the AT-11 and March Tower just before the ship crashed."

Vic sat on the mattress and read. He folded the paper and returned it to Colonel Bello.

"Why?" Vic said. "What would Roy gain by having Frank substitute? Why would Frank agree to substitute? They were both in the same boat."

"If they did it to confuse us,"

Colonel Bello said, "they confused us."

"Maybe they were both on the plane," Vic said.

"No," the swarthy officer said. "The operations officer saw that only one man boarded—even if he doesn't know who the man was. Where in the hell that officer learned his set of procedures, God knows."

"Why?" Vic said. He took off the scrubby pajama issue and pulled on his underwear. "Why?"

The Colonel rose. "I sent a pick-up order for Carlton to El Paso and Mitchell Field."

"He won't be there," Vic said. "Maybe Carlton is the dead man."

"Then where's Blackford?"

"Hell," Vic said. "This has got to be Frank. If Roy said crap, he'd squat."

"Then where's Carlton?"

Vic held a washrag under the cold-water faucet, wrung it out, and held it against his forehead. "Colonel," he said. "That transcript clears me, right?"

"That's right," the Colonel said. "You're clean."

"Let me find that son of a bitch. I've been insulted and I've been injured; and if I don't break Roy Carlton's back one way or another, I'll never be a well man."

Colonel Bello smiled. "I'll have a seven-day convalescent leave ready for you in the office. But let us get Carlton. You find a girl and forget everything. Carlton's already cost us more planes and officers than an enemy squadron could."

CHAPTER XVII

Vic sat before his desk. Pressing work had been cleared or allocated to other officers. The leave was in his wallet. He could go anywhere. If he knew anywhere to go.

The blonde WAC came to his desk. "What about Lieutenant Blackford's insurance policy, Lieutenant Jennings?"

"I don't know," Vic said. "Don't do anything yet. We have to have positive identification. And we have to decide whether his death is service-connected. Just put the paper in *hold*."

"All right, handsome," she said. "I will."

Vic watched her walk across the room and smiled. Insurance business was brisk, he thought. First, Colonel Sloan became $10,000 for his beneficiary. Now Blackford's turn to become a certified check.

"Hey, Sergeant," Vic called, "who is Blackford's beneficiary?"

The WAC flipped the papers. "His mother," she said.

"Oh," Vic said.

Well, at least, money could console one of the bereaved. Sandra Sloane, a most beautiful bereaved. And the musk-scented object of the affections of both the villains. Not that she couldn't turn Vic Jennings from white to rosy-red. Maybe she'd know where Roy was.

And if she didn't, maybe she'd just have ideas. Both she and Vic were victims of the same cruel scoundrel. They had something to share. Not that he intended to insinuate himself into. . . .

He turned the pages of the directory. *Sloan, William T., Colonel USAAF.* He dialed the number. His head still ached. Had she been told that her husband's death was murder?

The receiver burred in his ear. All leads had trailed out. El Paso reported that no Lieutenant Carlton had hitched a ride anywhere.

The phone rang again. The piano tuner in Beverly Hills had said hell no he didn't have a nephew named Frank Blackford.

The phone rang and rang again. Where the hell was she? With that Carlton's luck, she was probably out slinking and catting with him, having a ball in Rio or somewhere. Vic chuckled. Somehow he resented that possibility more than anything else Roy had done.

He hung up. What the hell, he might as well follow it up. That's the way detectives do. Any lead. Bulldog tenacity. Just leg work. He searched the directory for the name of the apartment house. Catalina Estates, Superintendent's office.

He dialed.

"Catalina Estates, Grayburn speaking."

"Mr. Grayburn," Vic said. "Mrs. Sloan in 307 doesn't answer the phone. Has she vacated?"

"Not to our knowledge," the phone said. "Mrs. Sloan has a twelve-month lease. November to November. I'm sure she would have notified us had she planned to move."

"Mr. Grayburn," Vic said. "It is essential that I get in touch with Mrs. Sloan right away. Would anyone have any idea where she is?"

"May I ask who's calling?" the phone said. "We don't usually violate the privacy of our guests."

"My fault," Vic said. "I'm Lieutenant Jennings, Personnel Officer at Hoffman. I must talk to Mrs. Sloan about insurance matters."

The phone said immediately, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant Jennings," and clicked.

Vic held the instrument to his ear. "It's good to be known," he said into the blank line.

He hung up, found the *U.S. Government Post Office* in the directory, and dialed the number.

"This is Lieutenant Jennings, Hoffman Field," he said. "I have a message for Mrs. William T. Sloan, 307 Catalina Estates. Please give me her forwarding address."

The telephone laughed. "Yes, sir," it said. "Oh, yes, sir."

I didn't sound that bad, Vic thought. Voices planged faintly across the wire. A steady ticking sounded. What's that, Vic thought, a sorting machine?

"We're still delivering mail to the present address, Lieutenant."

"You are?" Vic said.

"Yessir."

Vic said nothing.

"There's a card here about a temporary forwarding address Mrs. Sloan had for two weeks about four months ago. You want it?"

"I sure do," Vic said.

"Laguna Beach, California," the phone said. "1002 Table Rock Road. That help?"

"I hope so," Vic said. "I certainly thank you."

"Line of duty," the phone said and clicked.

"Well," Vic said. "Well." He put the address in his wallet beside the leave papers, positioned the chair neatly before the empty desk, took his cap, and went through the building across the lawn to the parking lot.

He drove to the Catalina Estates and parked near the entrance canopy.

He stopped at the bank of mail compartments in the lobby. Envelopes shone whitely in the window of 307.

The corridor of the third floor was deserted. Wadded under the door were two newspapers.

Vic tipped up the lid of the box against the wall. Inside were two bottles of milk.

He went out to his car, hesitated, climbed in, drove home, and packed his overnight grip.

CHAPTER XVIII

Vic took an American Airlines plane from Tucson to Los Angeles, a bus to Laguna, and a cab to 1002 Table Rock Road.

The driver put the valise on the ground near Vic. "See there, about a hundred yards back? On that rise overlooking the ocean?" He pointed through the dusk. "That's the house."

Vic paid him and watched the cab drive away. He touched the jacket pocket in which the .38 automatic lay heavily. He shrugged to re-set the jacket on his shoulders, lifted the bag, and started up the path. In the twilight air, the smell of the sea was strong. The steady rhythm of the rolling surf was serene and hypnotic. Vic sighed, and stepped onto the patio of the rambling frame and stucco house.

A dim light shone through the picture window. He saw an old woman sitting awkwardly on a low, wrought-metal couch. On her head was a tiny white gauze cap. She rubbed her eyes with a large handkerchief, crumpled the cloth, and sobbed. The single harsh sound was audible through the glass.

Vic backed away on the patio. He hesitated, stepped forward, and knocked.

The door opened slightly, through the crack, Vic could see the old woman's pinched face, her eyes red and suffused.

"Pardon me," Vic said. "Is this 1002 Table Rock Road?"

"Ja," the old woman said. "You want?"

"I'm looking for Mrs. Sandra Sloan," Vic said. "Is she home?"

"Sandra?" the woman said. "You mean Sarah? Sarah?"

Her voice broke. "Och, why you didn't come since a half hour? You could have helped her!"

"Helped her?" Vic said.

"You're supposed to protect people, ain't it?"

"Me?" Vic said.

"Ain't you a policeman?"

"No," Vic said. "I'm a soldier. What's wrong? What happened?"

"Och," she said. "A soldier. I get those suits so ferhuddled."

"Why do you want a policeman? Are you expecting one?"

"The doctor said. He said he'd send." The old woman opened the door and bobbed her head. "You can come in oncet. I'm Sarah's aunt. I been here already six months. Sarah's man died, he was a soldier but he was a nice man."

Vic followed the old woman into the living room. "What happened?" he said. "Where's . . . Sarah?"

"I shoulda stayed home," the old woman said. "I come from a farm in Pennsylvania. You ever been there? Sarah used to live there. It was her home anyway before she went gay. After my mother got dead—that was last year—the farm got sold and Sarah and her husband, he was a good man, they told me to come live here to keep the house red up and take care while they went all around the country. Do you fly them planes?"

"No," Vic said. "Please. What happened?"

The old woman began to cry, her hands hanging by her side. "I knew!" she said. "When she left the church, I knew! No good could come. Och, such a shame for her, she was always so purty—so purty!"

"Please," Vic said. "Please."

"First her man died so funny and now this, now this . . ." the old woman said.

"Listen!" Vic said. "Why do you want a policeman? What was a doctor here for? What happened here just now?"

"Och, my, it was awful," the woman moaned. "She got here last night on one of them airplanes from she says two-son in Arizona—and then all day she sat around sorta ferhutzt-like and listened to the radio—all that war news and stuff about airplane smash-ups. It's no wonder there's war the way people carry on. And she was awful upset about this one airplane smash-up and she tried to call some people about it . . . and then . . . it's not more'n hour ago there was this rap on the door, and Sarah went and answered, and there was this young man standin there. . . . "

"Was he in uniform?" Vic said. "Was he dressed like me?"

"No," the old woman said, "He chust had on a suit, a nice blue—dark-blue—suit. He was your size maybe. A little smaller. Sarah just looked at him. She never said a

word. Not the whole time. He put his arms around her and said, 'Well, I have a hundred grand.' He didn't say what the hundred grand things were. They couldn'ta been very big, because he wasn't carrying anything. Sarah turned away and her eyes were so big. 'A hundred grand,' he says. He turns her around and starts to kiss her and she chust stands, her eyes big, she doesn't say a word. She never said a word. She closes her eyes and all at once he went mad-like and puts his hand in his pocket and back and forth across her face, back and forth with a razor blade he cuts and he cuts and she screams and screams and screams!" The old woman grasped Vic's arms. "I never heard it in my life the way she screams!"

Vic stood still.

"Look at the rug," the old woman said. "Blood, everywhere, so much of it, blood. I looked for a butcher knife or something to help, when I got back he had went. I saw this man through the window, he got into a machine with writing on it and they went off."

Vic helped the old woman to the sofa. "A machine with writing on it?" he said. "You mean a taxicab?"

"Ja," she said. "And then I used the telephone for a doctor to come. You know, it's awful hard to get a doctor out here to come? Back home old Doc Werner woulda been here in two minutes. Finally I got him to say he would come. Sarah was unconscious. She just lay there and moaned. I tried to stop the blood as best I could. They'll never fix her up. What he did to her face, it's like flaps hangin' everywhere, it's like back home they make mince meat. She was always so purty. I always said that: she was too good lookin' for her own good. I always said that. Well anyways, the doctor finally come and he got the ambulance and they took her away, and I don't even know where, but I guess they'll call me."

The old woman looked at Vic. "Your face is white," she said. "It's awful, ain't it?"

Vic sat on the low coffee table.

The old woman took a deep breath. "You reap chust what you sow. I watched that time and time again, and nothin' in the Bible is truer, if these girls would chust realize it oncet for all. And if a girl's purty, it makes it that much harder. If Sarah woulda chust stayed in the church and covered her body with plain clothes, she's have a nice fambly now and none a this woulda happened. That's one thing I guess I should be grateful for, I guess—I was never purty."

She stopped and was silent.

Vic went to the phone and dialed the Pacific Cab Company.

"An hour or so back," Vic said into the phone, "one of your drivers waited for a man in civilian clothes at 1002 Table Rock Road. Please have that driver come to the same address immediately. It's urgent. Thank you."

He waited by the picture window. The old woman was silent, looking at the rug.

Twenty minutes later, a cab stopped outside. A horn blew.

"I knowed she took the name Sandra," the old woman said.

Vic ran to the cab.

"You remember where you took the man you waited for—about an hour ago?" Vic said from the back seat.

The driver, a man with thick glasses and a thick lower lip, said, "Sure, the guy with the nosebleed. Hey, dad, I'd like to hit oil like that. Blood all over him."

"Where'd you take him?"

"Glenneyrie Hotel," the driver said. "He had a handkerchief over his face. I wanted to take him to a doctor, but he said he gets nosebleed all the time and he could stop it himself at the hotel."

Vic held out a five-dollar bill. "Get me there fast."

The driver took the bill and folded it. "The fare is extra?" He backed into the driveway and swerved forward toward town.

Vic clung to the seat. "Yes," he said.

The engine of the cab roared down the road. Suddenly the driver braked and the cab slowed.

"Come on," Vic said. "Help me, will ya, fella?"

"Just a minute," the driver said.

A black car with a blinking red light on the roof swept toward them and passed. The driver watched in the rear view mirror until the car was out of sight.

"Police," the cabdriver said.

"Oh," Vic said.

The cab rolled swiftly forward. The canopy of the Glenneyrie came into view. Vic threw two dollar bills to the seat beside the driver and was out of the cab before the wheel had stopped turning.

Vic ran through the lobby, his hand against his jacket and the .38 automatic.

The desk clerk stepped back from the counter.

"Did a man with nosebleed just check in?" Vic said.

The clerk said, "A man with a nosebleed? No, he checked in early this afternoon. That is, he didn't have a nosebleed when he checked in. He came back a while ago with a nosebleed."

"All right," Vic said. "What room?"

"Now listen," the clerk said.

"That man is a murderer," Vic said. "What room?"

"Three nineteen," the clerk said.

Vic held out a trembling hand. "Give me a key in case he won't open the door."

"A murderer," the clerk said. "You can't . . . what can you . . . are you . . ." He looked at Vic's hand and pulled a key from under the counter.

Vic seized the key and ran to the elevator. The dial above the doors moved from 7 to 6 to 5. Vic turned and walked back to the clerk.

"Call the police," he said, in a muffled voice. "Send them up. I may need help."

He went to the elevator and pushed button #3.

He walked silently through the carpeted hall of the third floor. 315. 317. 319. He stood before the door. No sound within. He raised his fist. He swallowed and lowered his fist. He took the .38 from his pocket and snapped off the safety. He stood before the door, the automatic hanging heavy in his right hand, and knocked weakly on the door with his left hand.

A harsh voice said, "Who is it?"

"Why," Vic said, "the house doctor. I'm the house doctor. The clerk said you had an accident."

"You can't help me" the harsh voice said. "I had a nosebleed. It's finished now."

"I've got to look at you," Vic said.

No answer.

"Rules of the house," Vic said. "Only take a minute."

"Forget it," the voice said. "Forget it."

Vic slipped the key in the lock, brought up the revolver, and threw the door open.

A man in shorts stood staring out the window, his back to the door. The man turned.

Vic lowered the gun and jerked it up again.

"Vic," the man said into the silence. "I'm honest-to-God glad it's you."

"Blackford!" Vic said. "Blackford! But you're—don't do anything, God damn it, I'll kill you. I will!"

Frank shrugged. His eyes were wet. He didn't raise his hands.

Vic backed up to put his shoulders against the wall. He looked at Frank and around the room.

"Where's Roy?" he said. "Where the hell is Roy?"

"Dead," Frank said. "Listen, Vic, either shoot me or put that damn thing away, I don't care which. I won't do anything, Vic. There's nothing left for me to do."

Vic stared.

Frank smiled. "You know what Frank has been doing for the last twenty minutes? Throwing up in the toilet. On my knees, face in the bowl, splashing my guts in the toilet. You afraid of me, Vic?"

Vic lowered the gun.

"If I had any guts left, I'd make you pull that trigger," Frank said.

"What in God's name?" Vic said, finally.

Frank sat on the bed. "You know we both took off in that AT-11 last night? I climbed in at the edge of the field where Roy turned to make his run."

"No," Vic said. "I didn't know."

"Well," Frank said, "Roy and I didn't need each other any more. I was going to knock him out, land the plane, take all the money and leave."

Frank lay on the bed, hands under his head. "Roy's idea, of course,

was better than mine. He brought a gun and was going to put me in the pilot's seat, put his identification on me, set the plane on fire and bail out. "It would have worked. Nobody even knew I was aboard."

"Why didn't it?" Vic said.

"We hit an air pocket and I slugged him with my fist. Then I tried to use his idea. We always used *his* ideas. I called May day to March tower, bailed out, buried the chute, hitchhiked into Banning, took a bus to LA, bought civies, came down this afternoon to Sandra."

"To cut her up?" Vic said. "Why?"

"I was in love with her," Frank said. "I am in love with her."

Vic shook his head and swallowed.

"She's beautiful," Frank said.

"No, she's not," Vic said.

"I know," Frank said. "I'm not sorry about that. She said she'd meet me here, we'd be together from then on."

"Why?" Vic said. "You had a razor all ready."

"Yes," Frank said. "Roy held the gun on me and told me everything I had ever said to Sandra, told me that he and Sandra had led me on so I would stick my neck out in this liquor deal. He even said that he had told Sandra just what to say to me each time Sandra and I met. That Sandra and he were going to meet here after he killed me. And that the 'hot-assed little bitch'—that's what he called her—I didn't mind killing him—really loved him."

"And you got even by slashing her face?"

"No," Frank said. "I didn't really believe Roy until I got to Sandra's house. I saw her face, Vic. She wasn't expecting me. She thought I would be dead. She expected *him*."

"If you didn't believe Roy," Vic said, "how come you had a razor in your pocket?"

Frank closed his eyes. "I don't know, Vic. I honest-to-God don't know. But it was in my pocket. And I knew it was in my pocket."

Vic put the automatic into his pocket. "She deserved it."

"No," Frank said. "I deserved it."

Vic walked to the door. "Frank," he said, "the police will be up soon."

"All right," Frank said.

"Goodbye," Vic said.

"Vic?"

"Yes?"

"Will they pay off my G.I. insurance even if I'm hanged?"

"I don't know," Vic said.

"Do what you can, will you, Vic?" Frank said. "I mean, if there's a chance they'll give my beneficiary the money?"

"I'll do what I can," Vic said.

CHAPTER XIX

Vic stepped from the parlor car steps to the platform and ran to the

gate, valise swinging awkwardly.

Consuela was waiting.

Vic dropped the valise and kissed her. She clung to him.

He cupped her soft, whole face in his hands and studied her glowing olive skin.

"You got my wire?" he said absently.

"Of course, *Estupido,*" she said, kissing him quickly. "Would I be here?"

He drew his forefinger along the high cheekbone and the curve of her jaw and paused at the dimple by her smiling mouth. No flaw. No mark. No blemish. He shivered and laid his cheek against hers.

"You have good news?" Consuela murmured.

"I do, honey," he said. "I do!" He drew her arm through his, picked up the valise. "Let's find a quiet table in a private spot and I'll tell you what happened to our smart friends."

"I do not yet know," Consuela said. "But I am sure without knowing. Your name is clean, and they are punished. Is that not what you have to tell me?"

"Yes, my confident darling," Vic said. "That's precisely what I have to tell you. What makes you so sure?"

She pressed his arm against her bosom."I am always sure," she said, "that it is wise not to be smart."

Vic laughed. "And do you know," he said, "whether I am wise or I am smart to ask you the question I am going to ask you?"

Consuela stopped walking and Vic swung around.

"I know," she said.

"Which?"

Consuela leaned and kissed him. "I'll never tell you," she said.

"Why not?" Vic said.

"Because," Consuela said, "you will find out all by yourself—the rest of your life."

MANHUNT'S

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They were coming into mountain country now, and soon it would be getting cooler. That would be a relief. Here, the road shimmered and swam as Ryan squinted through the bug-flecked windshield. He could feel the hot wind on his elbow. They had been rolling for almost five hours and he needed a beer. The steady drone of the deisel had begun to make him drowsy and he was starting to sweat again.

The truck cab smelled of damp leather and fuel oil. Two fuzzy dice hung from the top-center of the windshield and a plastic Virgin Mary, Scotch-taped to the top of the dashboard, blessed both Ryan and his sleeping co-driver.

Ryan was glad that the heat would give him an excuse to stop for another beer. He was getting jumpy again. He had heard that some of the new cab-over-engine rigs were air-conditioned.

Jesus, that'd be all right, he thought.

Ryan saw a long grade coming. He dropped into third, low-range without watching the tach. He was good. After the first hour all he needed for engine rpm was the sound and the feel of it. He eased out the clutch and there was never a lurch. The big tanker never hesitated. Only the higher drone of the engine woke up Bobo. The shift had been that smooth.

"Where we at, sport?"

"Right on schedule, Bobo, no sweat."

"How you doing?"

"No sweat, I told you. Just take it easy!"

"O.K., O.K., Ryan, just keep your shirt on. A few more hours and you've got it made."

HOT FURS

BY DAVID KASANOF

The five years in stir had shaken Ryan badly. And here he was, rolling the big truck along at an easy 45 miles per . . . and behind him the scream of a siren. Ryan panicked and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

"That's easy for you to say, sleeping away like you was on a Goddam picnic."

"So, maybe Dekker's not paying you enough?"

"Who said anything about that? Five hundred clams the first trip out, I'm not complaining."

"So relax."

"Sure. Relax, he says. You're no two-time loser. Anything goes wrong they'll rap your knuckles. Me, they'll throw the key away."

"Nothing'll go wrong. I've been ferrying hot stuff for Dekker three years. Hasn't anything gone wrong yet."

"There's always a first time. I don't know; maybe I shouldn't've taken this job. Fifty thousand clams worth of furs back there. Jesus. Suppose we get stopped?"

"Ah, for Pete's sake. Look, for the tenth time, we're a couple of working stiffs driving for Dekker Distributors, Incorporated, and we're hauling six thousand pounds of High-octane juice into Bakersfield. Now, you've got a bill of lading that shows just that, so shut up and drive."

Bobo leaned back in the seat, cocked his hat down over his face and closed his eyes. Ryan still wanted to talk.

"One Goddam flower pot in the whole place."

"Hah?"

"Back at Joliet. I did a fiver."

"Uh huh."

"They had what they call 'tiers' of cells, all in a circle. Me, I was in third tier, cell 323. Five years."

"Yeah yeah."

"Right in the center they had the tower with three 30-caliber air-cooled on rails. One of the screws had this vase. Every day he'd put fresh flowers in it. Every day, fresh flowers in this one chintzy pot. Five years. Jesus."

"Drive the bus."

Bobo turned, facing the window on his side, and pretended to go to sleep.

Ryan tried to concentrate on a cold beer as the semi chewed its way up the grade. It was no good. He kept thinking of the load of furs back there in the tank. Sometimes he thought of flowers.

He resented Dekker's man having been sent along on the run, just to check him out; make sure he stayed out of trouble. He could cut it. Hell, he just needed a little time, was all. Still, it was better having someone to talk to, even Bobo.

He saw a sign ahead. EAT. Underneath it said, CIGARETTES. Ryan thought it looked as if the sign said, "Eat cigarettes." He thought he might tell that to Bobo but when he turned to speak he saw that Bobo's back was to him. He figured it wasn't funny enough to wake him for. He touched the brakes and began to check down through the gears. Bobo sat up.

"What the hell?"

"Need a beer."

"You just had lunch."

"Four hours ago. Let's get a short one."

"You're not running no steamship schedule, you know."

"Just a short one and maybe a bite. It's roasting in here."

"Sure you're not getting the willies?"

"Look, Dekker sent you along to check me out, not give me the needle. You don't like the way I go, you drive!"

"No thanks. I'm just the watchdog. You want to stop, we stop. Just remember, act natural."

"What do you think, I'm going to walk in there on my hands?"

"Just don't get wise."

"I know how to act."

"Two cheers for you."

Ryan pulled into the parking area in front of the diner. He was surprised at the weight of the load as he braked to a stop. Bobo lurched forward in the seat.

"Where'd you learn to drive?"

"Ah, lay off. Should've checked the damn weight before we left."

"The weight's O.K. Don't worry about the weight."

They walked toward the diner. A dog with three legs hobbled away from the doorway as they approached. The screen door was covered with flies. Inside Ryan could see a fat man behind the counter, scraping the grill. He was smoking a cigar.

Bobo sighed with a sound that was like, "Sheeesh."

"What a dump," he said.

They went in. The screen door banged and there was furious buzzing for a moment but it died quickly. They sat.

"You the guys come in with the semi?" the fat man said.

Ryan said, "Yeah."

"Wanna watch it. Cost me two-hundred bucks a year to fix that black-top. You guys come in with those big jobbies and leave tracks all over my black-top."

"Sorry dad. Give us two short drafts," Ryan said.

"I got canned beer."

"What kind?"

"I can give you Ace, I can give you Glade."

"Oh brother!"

"Look, Mac. Nobody asked you come in here tearing up my black-top just to knock my beer. Couple punks think you own . . ."

"What was that?"

". . . think you own the whole damn . . ."

"What'd you call me, dad?"

The fat man stared at Ryan and rapidly chewed his cigar. He took a step backward and his hands drifted down under the counter. Ryan rose slowly, reaching for the ketchup bottle. Bobo clamped a restraining hand on Ryan's arm and said to the fat man, "Ah, don't mind my buddy, Mac. We're dropping time; been on the road since six o'clock this morning. Gotta get something to eat. You know how it is. My buddy's kind of edgy."

The fat man's hands came up

and rested on the counter top and Ryan sank back onto the stool again.

"Let's have two beers. What was it, 'Ace'? Give us two of the Ace," Bobo continued.

"Two it is. No offense fellows."

"Sorry," Ryan muttered.

Bobo looked up at the blackboard over the cash register.

"What's an 'Atomic Burger'?"

"You get two burgers on a bun, cheese, lettuce and tomato, pickle, and a order french fries."

"Let's have two of them."

The fat man turned to put the meat on the grill.

Bobo glared at Ryan and sighed once more.

"Sheeesh!"

They ate in silence and, when they had finished, Bobo left a large tip. They called out, "See you around," but the fat man did not reply. He scraped the grill in quick, vicious jabs of the greasy spatula.

Ryan drove on for about fifteen minutes before Bobo said, "What do you use for brains, anyway?"

"Well I don't take that crap from some hick slob."

"So you almost get in a fight. You ever think what happens if we got into a beef and somebody called the cops? Huh? You want state troopers asking you what you're doing with a fuel tanker full of fur coats and a cargo manifest that says high-octane gas? Huh? What do you, take stupid pills?"

"O.K., O.K., so I got sore."

"Look, Mortimer, you pull another boner like that and you're out. Remember what you're carrying back there and just keep your nose clean, you read me?"

"O.K., O.K."

"Supposed to see whether you can cut it."

"All right. All right, I can cut it. I just got sore."

"In this business you lose your head just once, just once honey chile and it's good night ladies."

"Shut up, Bobo! Shut your mouth!"

"Wake me up when we hit Bakersfield."

Bobo sagged down in the seat and closed his eyes again. Ryan envied that ability of Bobo's; to sleep almost anywhere at a moment's notice. Ryan always had trouble sleeping, especially after his last term at Joliet. He tried not to think of it. He concentrated on the money he would make from this trip. Then there would be other trips, if Bobo turned in a good report. There'd be money and all the things that went with it. Plenty of sharp clothes, plenty of booze, the real stuff, women falling all over themselves chasing after him. That was the best. He remembered the long nights he had spent thinking about them. Jesus, and all that time there was this one chintzy vase . . .

He had been lulled by the steady drone of the deisel and was startled when Bobo sat up suddenly and said, "Slow it down!"

"I'm doing 45; legal speed."

"Check down! I thought I heard a siren!"

Ryan could feel sickness starting from someplace in his stomach and branching out 'til it reached his fingertips. His hands started to shake and he thought he might have to vomit. Then he heard the siren. He began to blubber, "Oh Jesus, it's cops. Oh Jesus I don't want to go back there. Jesus, Bobo, they throw away the key on me this time, I can't go back there, Jesus!"

Ryan's foot pressed the accelerator. The wail of the siren increased.

"Slow this Goddam thing down, you jerk! Maybe he's not after us!"

But Ryan didn't slow down. His knuckles shone white and shiny with sweat and he said, "Ah . . . ah . . . ah," in a peculiar, high voice. The speedometer needle climbed past 50. The siren was very loud now, and Ryan could see the Patrol car coming up fast in his side view mirror. He could see the red light flashing. He began to cry, "Ah . . . ah . . . ah," like an infant and his trembling foot was welded to the floored accelerator.

"Check down, Ryan, you can't outrun him on this road!"

Ryan's face was rigid. His eyes bulged and his arms flailed as he fought to keep the big truck on the road. The patrol car was right behind them now. They were doing 65 starting down a long grade.

"Gear down, Ryan. You gotta gear down!"

Ryan could hear only the siren. He prayed to the Virgin not to be sent to prison again. They gathered speed.

"You fink! You lousy fink! You-'ll kill us both!"

Bobo braced both feet up on the dashboard and bent forward with his face in his hands as he saw the curve which they could never make.

The big semi crunched through the guard rail with not much noise and careened down an embankment. Small shrubs and saplings cut their speed and they were still upright when they reached the bottom. Here, though, the cab nosed into the side of a hummock and the trailer flipped over with a heavy "crump."

Bobo climbed out, but Ryan was pinned behind the steering wheel because the cab chassis had been badly sprung. Above, on the road, Ryan heard the dying wail of the siren as the patrol car screeched to a stop. He began to whimper again.

"Bobo, I gotta get out of here! Get me out of here! I can make it to the woods! Don't let that cop look back there! Get me out of here, Bo!"

"Shut up! Just keep your stupid mouth shut! Here comes the cop."

The state trooper was running and sliding down the embankment.

"You O.K. fella? How's your buddy?"

"O.K., officer, but he's pinned behind the wheel."

"Christ, what the hell did he try to run for? Some guy in a diner back there said you guys tracked up his blacktop and gave him a hard time. I was just going to read you guys out, check your weight and cargo; give you a routine once-over."

"Well, my buddy's new, officer. He got rattled and then he lost his brakes on that hill."

"Well, we'd better get him out of there."

"I guess I can bend the steering wheel enough so's he can slide out."

"O.K. I better radio in for the chemical unit just in case your gas goes up. 'Course I still got to check you guys over."

"Yes sir, I'll get the Bill of Lading."

The trooper ran back up the hill to his car and Bobo stepped on the running board to help Ryan out.

"Bobo, you nuts? He'll want to check the cargo!"

"Shut your mouth, fink, and suck in your gut so's I can get a hold on this steering wheel."

"Bobo, I gotta lam out of here!"

"You're not running anywhere!"

"But they'll find those furs!"

"You fink! You think Dekker would be dumb enough to trust a fink like you with a load of hot stuff the first time out? This was a dry run, just to check you out, you fink!"

Then there was a loud "whooo-mp" and Bobo jumped back.

Bobo's words were the last ones Ryan heard because it was then that part of the six-thousand pounds of high-octane gasoline that Ryan had been hauling, flooded blazing into the cab.

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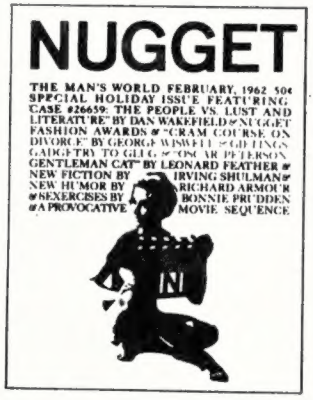
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